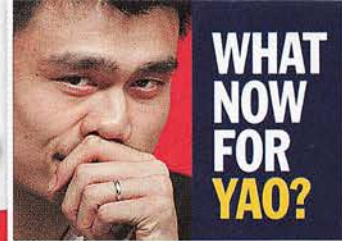


Look what they've done to your **Yankees**

# Sporting News

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**Matt  
Ryan  
has  
IT\***

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you want in  
an NFL QB

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Who the hell  
is Joe Flacco?

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Week of March 10, 2008





Old Spice



BLONDES PREFER GENTLEMEN





# THIS WEEK

**COVER STORY**

> **NFL DRAFT**

## 10 Matt quest

Boston College's Matt Ryan isn't the most gifted quarterback, but he has always had it—the intangible that separates the Tom Bradys from the Ryan Leafs. *By Steve Greenberg*

> **NFL DRAFT**

## 18 Who is this guy?

Meet Joe Flacco, one of the best darn quarterbacks in the NFL draft. *By Steve Greenberg*

> **NBA**

## 20 Yes man

Forget about the Rockets' playoff hopes. Yao Ming's latest foot injury could put something even bigger in jeopardy—his career—if he doesn't learn one simple word: *no*. *By Stan McNeal*

> **COLLEGE BASKETBALL**

## 24 An inside job

Freshman Kyle Singler has embraced his role as Duke's defensive enforcer in the post. Yeah, he's still working on the look. *By Mike DeCourcy*

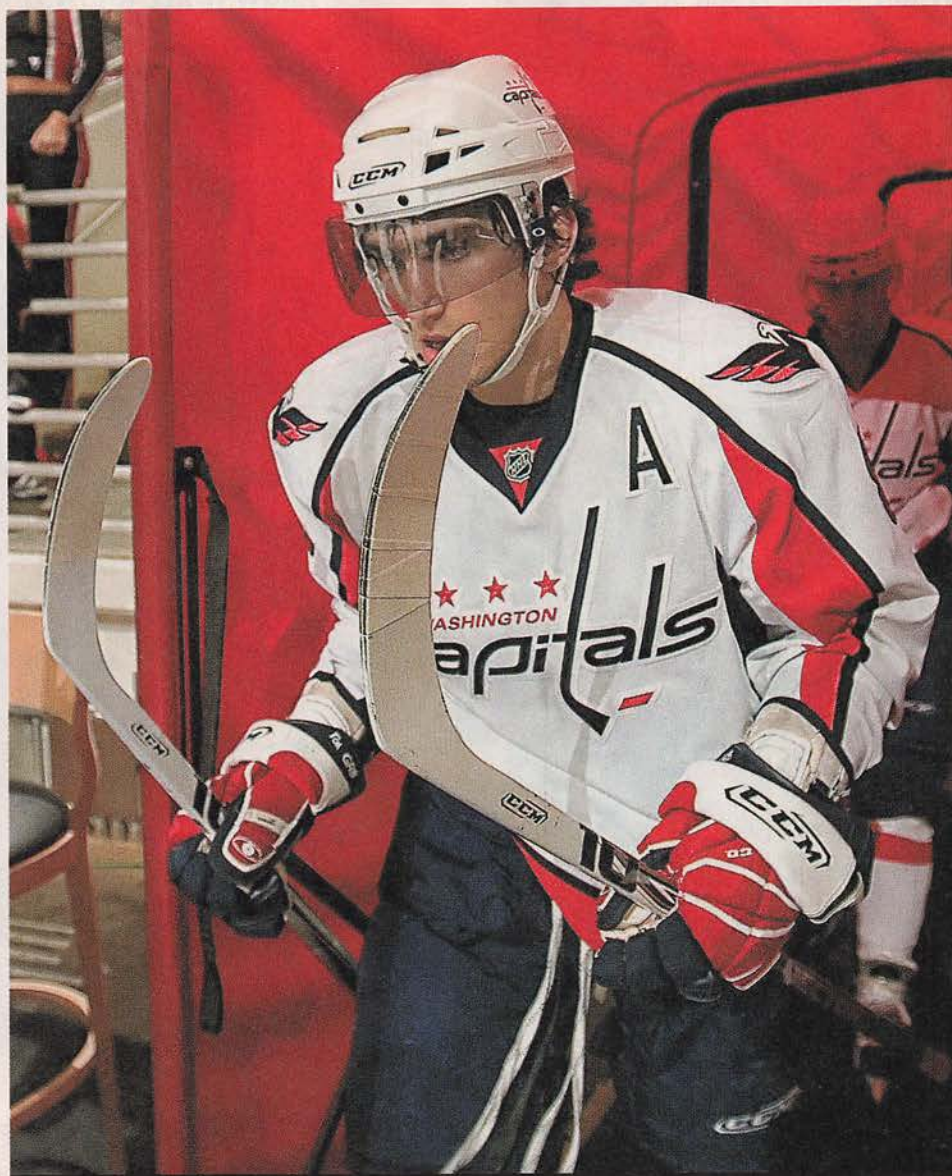
> **NHL**

## 26 The snipers

Defining this hockey term is as tricky as pronouncing the names of many NHL goaltenders. But there's one thing everyone knows: These guys can put the puck in the net. *By Victor Chi*

## KNOW IT ALL

- 2 To Know List** College basketball's one-and-dones give March Madness an NBA overtone.
- 5 On Deck** Shaq meets the Spurs and other hoops madness. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5**.
- 6 Training days** A taste of spring with an autumn feel.
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**26**

It's a good thing the NHL doesn't allow Alexander Ovechkin to use two sticks. He's pretty dangerous with one.

## INSIDER

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KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

Mayo plays in a city  
full of stars ...  
but will he become  
one himself?



# TO KNOW LIST

8 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1

THE MAIN EVENT

## A dress rehearsal for the big show

With all due respect to the best postseason in sports—that would be college basketball's, which starts in earnest next week—the college game has been NBA-overtone beyond the point of recognition. That was true in 2007—aka The Year of Oden or Durant?—when freshmen lorded over the headlines and six of them became NBA lottery picks. And it is ever truer in 2008, as “who’s better?” debates rage about a bumper crop of one-and-done stars, *seven* of whom are pegged for the lottery according to the latest mock draft at NBAdraft.net.

So you can take Kansas State’s Michael Beasley, Memphis’ Derrick Rose, Indiana’s Eric Gordon and USC’s O.J. Mayo, to name four, and order them as college players any way you like. You might even change your mind over the course of the next spectacularly exciting month. But what matters far more in the grand scheme of things is that all four players already have one foot out the door.

Rose is the point guard of a team that will go down as a bust if it doesn’t reach the Final Four. Beasley is a one-man

show in a program that will have wasted its biggest opportunity in 20 years if it fails to make some real noise in March. Both pressure-filled stories will be overtaken in a blink by the *real* issue on the table: Will Rose and Beasley go 1-2 in the draft, or vice versa?

Gordon, who sits on the fringes of the top five, has invited charges of having a draft agenda with some of his wilder 25-foot shot attempts. It’s one thing when it happens in a game at Michigan, quite another if it happens at tourney time for a scandal-endangered Hoosiers program trying desperately to hold on to its present.

Mayo, who was one of the most hyped recruits of this decade, could fully recover his rep with a great March. But he enters the postseason in danger of slipping out of the lottery. Think that won’t make him hoist a shot or two he probably shouldn’t?

Come late June, it will be a whole new ballgame for all of them. They’ll already have played their parts in a sea change for college basketball.

—Steve Greenberg

2

SEVEN UP

## One-and-done this decade

How former freshman draft picks are faring in the NBA

**7 Greg Oden, Trail Blazers ('07).** We’re giving the big man the benefit of the doubt. It’s either that or include Gerald Wallace on this list.

**6 Zach Randolph, Knicks ('01).** No one doubts anymore that, at 6-9, he can score inside. Or take down a buffet at 260-plus.

**5 Marvin Williams, Hawks ('05).** He’s long and smooth, but he lacks any semblance of true star quality.

**4 Luol Deng, Bulls ('04).** You don’t think the Suns—who traded Deng for a song on draft day—would kill to have him in their lineup?

**3 Chris Bosh, Raptors ('03).** Nobody does underrated better than the string bean who could be mayor (OK, maybe comptroller) of Toronto.

**2 Kevin Durant, Sonics ('07).** He’s skinny, he wears down—he’s 19! A future league scoring leader, we’re betting.

**1 Carmelo Anthony, Nuggets ('03).** Not a lot of winning being done by the guys on this list, now is there? —S.G.

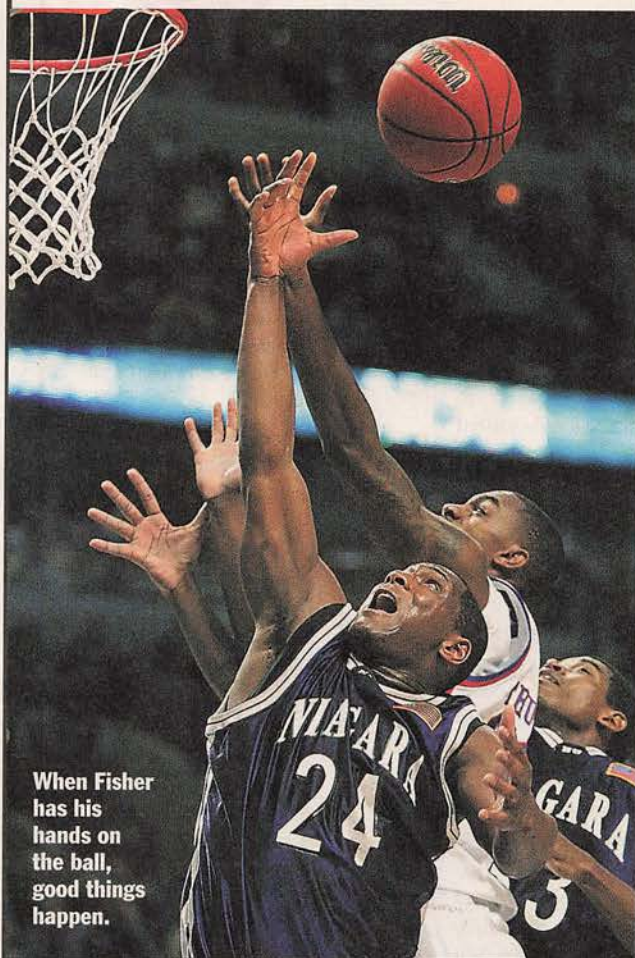


3

REMEMBER THE NAME

## Charron Fisher

On Saturday, Niagara will take the court in search of its 20th win, which would leave it two shy of an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament. If the Purple Eagles make it to Monday's Metro Atlantic championship game (7 p.m., ESPN2), Fisher—the nation's leading scorer at 27.7 points per game—will be on the spot to shoot them over the top. One of the toughest "small" guys in the college game, the 6-4, 230-pound senior also leads Niagara with 9.3 rebounds per game. Fisher, who scored 45 and 41 points in back-to-back games in mid-February, entered the week with a 0.03 ppg lead on VMI's Reggie Williams. —S.G.



When Fisher has his hands on the ball, good things happen.

4

**IS HE OR ISN'T HE?** For now, Brett Favre isn't retiring—but for a few minutes last week it looked like he was when a dummy page "announcing" his decision

accidentally went live on Packers.com. It was quickly taken down, but not before sending football fans across the country—and, undoubtedly, a few Packers staffers—into a tizzy.



5

QUICK CLICKS

## Sir Mix-a-Lot

What's better than watching the latest commercial starring Dwyane Wade and Charles Barkley? *Creating* one. At [t-mobilienba.com/duo](http://t-mobilienba.com/duo) you can choose from dozens of video clips, sound bites and music samples to mix your very own ad. Even better: Submit your remix by March 15 and it could be selected to air on national TV during this spring's playoffs. And who knows? If you win, maybe it'll get you into Dwyane and Chuck's Fave Five. —Tricia Garner

6

SPORTS APPAREL

## SoCal, SoCool

Out-of-work NFL coach becomes a college coaching icon and launches his own clothing line. It's the stuff of Hollywood.

That's why news that USC coach Pete Carroll is starting an apparel line ([petecarroll.com](http://petecarroll.com)) makes such fabulous sense. The togs include an assortment of T-shirts starting at \$19.99. On the high end, the greatest coach in college football offers a \$39.99 hoodie that would look great on the greatest coach in the NFL. Carroll even has designs for the ladies.

We like the shirt that says "Rips It," though we don't know what it means. But we are sure new UCLA coach Rick Neuheisel would look good in it. What's his size? —Tom Dienhart



You, too, can be a winner in cardinal and gold!

7

TECH SUPPORT

## On the go

As much as you'd like to sit on the couch and watch NASCAR every weekend, sometimes it's just not possible. Now you can stay connected to the Sprint Cup Series if you own a Sprint cell phone (shocking, eh?). Download the new offering (free to Sprint customers with a data pack) right to your phone and get live race audio—including the in-car communications—and real-time data and customize your application to track your favorite driver's progress.

—Ryan Fagan

8

IT BEARS REPEATING

**'I don't know about any cheat codes. I don't know if they put that in there or what the penalty would be if you entered any cheat codes, but we'll probably only let New England have cheat codes.'**

—Tony Dungy, cover star of EA Sports' NFL Head Coach 09 (out this summer), to GameTap.com on whether players will be able to "spy" on their opponents



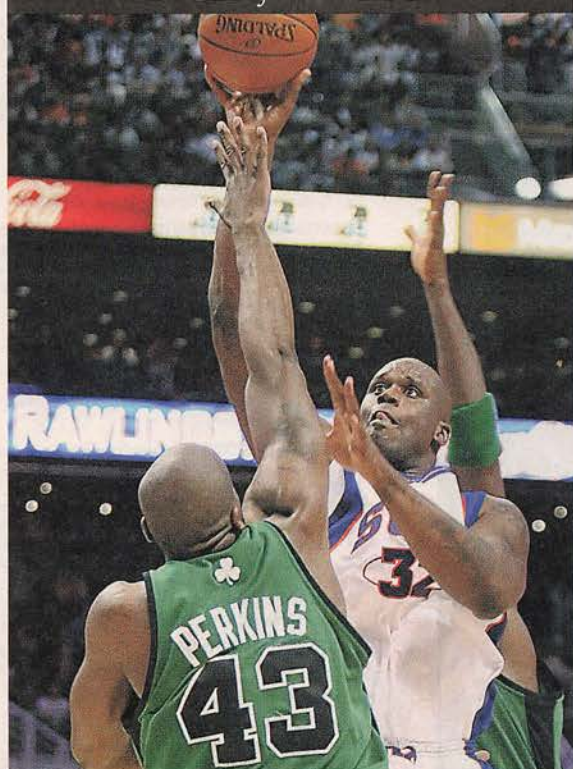


# ON DECK

All times Eastern

>>>>>>>>> The week ahead in sports

## PICK of the WEEK



**SUN 9** **Spurs at Suns** (3:30 p.m., ABC). The Suns traded for Shaq to help them beat the Spurs, and this is their first chance. Phoenix struggled after Shaq joined up; this game should provide a good measure of how much better his new team needs to get.

**SUN 9** New car, old track. Sprint Cup teams are still trying to get a handle on the new car, and they'll have their hands full in the **Kobalt Tools 500** (1:30 p.m., FOX) at Atlanta Motor Speedway, one of the sport's oldest, fastest and most popular tracks. The track is hard on tires, which is important this year because they wear out so quickly. It's easy to get loose at Atlanta, but that's not such a bad thing: The new car's wing stops a spinout before it happens.

**MON 10** Conference tourney title games in the **Colonial** (7 p.m., ESPN) and **Metro Atlantic** (7 p.m., ESPN2) will write the first chapters of two Cinderella stories on the hardwood. Virginia Commonwealth and Niagara appear to have decent shots at defending their crowns ... but this is March, so who knows?

■ The baseball being played in the Grapefruit League isn't as important as the college basketball being played almost everywhere, but it's still worth checking out. On Monday in Port St. Lucie, **Red Sox-Mets** is a potential World Series preview. On Tuesday in Winter Haven, it's **Tigers-Indians**; one of these teams will win the A.L. Central.

**WED 12** The **Big East Tournament** (7 p.m., ESPN) opens, and the field is wide-open. Five teams have at least 11 conference wins. —Matt Crossman

BOB HILLE'S  
STARTING

5

**1 Congress.** Seems like questioning sports commissioners again was just heading down a dead-end road, but I guess if that were true a senator would've already requested billions of tax dollars to build it in his home state.

**2 Pro days.** I didn't attend a football factory, but the last guy NFL scouts found at my alma mater ended up having a pretty decent career. He was a T-shirt cannon shooter for, like, three seasons.

**3 The NHL.** My team put up the white flag at the trading deadline. How do I know? Its key acquisitions were draft picks and preferred mid-April tee times.

**4 No. 1.** Let's be honest. Being atop the polls is highly overrated, apparently kind of like a few of the teams that have been atop the polls.

**5 Spring training games.** The older I get, the more I realize that each is an unsettling metaphor for life: Only the first two-thirds is really worth watching.

RICK SCUTERI / AP



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Hosted by Vida Guerra

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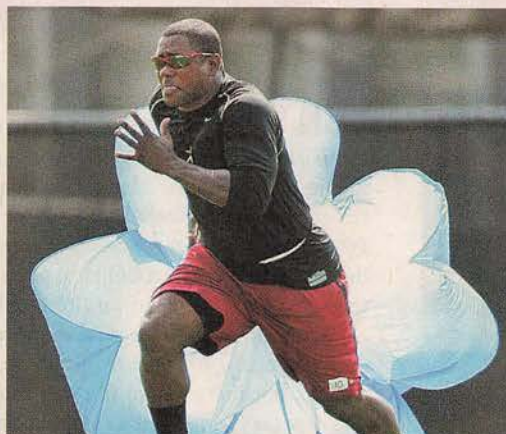


# Training days

Spring is (almost) here ... with a little bit of an autumn feel

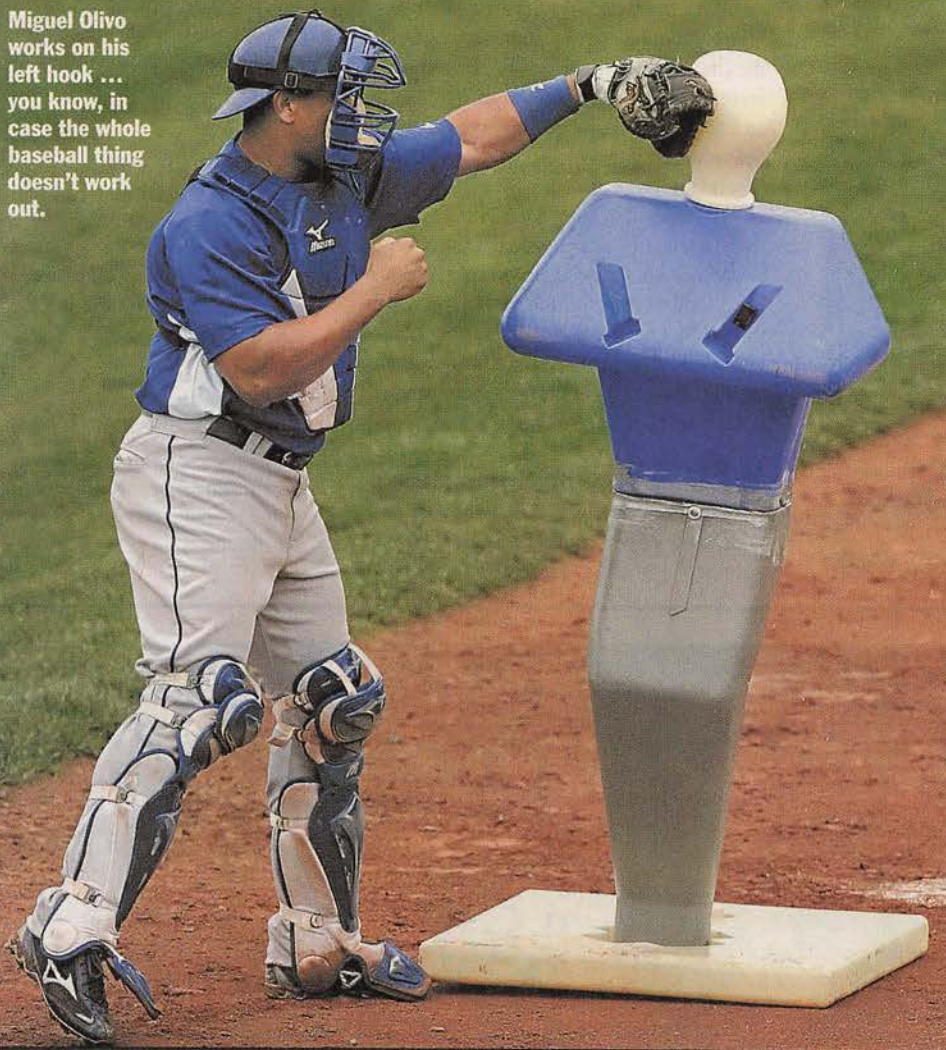


This little guy loves the Royals almost as much as he loves Tom Brady.



Miguel Tejada demonstrates the newest performance enhancer: running with a parachute.

Miguel Olivo works on his left hook ... you know, in case the whole baseball thing doesn't work out.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: DAVID J. PHILLIP / AP; CHARLIE RIEDEL / AP (2)

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# YOUR TURN

>>>>>>>>> You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to [yourturn@sportingnews.com](mailto:yourturn@sportingnews.com).



Johan Santana is a pretty sure bet, but imagining the rest of the Mets' rotation can be downright scary.

**“The Mets have a very good 1-2 punch. After that, it's anybody's guess.”** —CUgrad2000 via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

■ Dwight Howard (SN, February 25) is the man. He is going to dominate the league for the next 10 years. Chris Paul is nice, too. Both players should be in everyone's top five for MVP. —lbizzy420 via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

■ It's fun to hate the Lakers again (SN, February 25). Welcome back, L.A. The NBA was not quite as fun when you were hovering around mediocrity. —PabloDeTejas via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

■ Roger Clemens planned on denying the whole

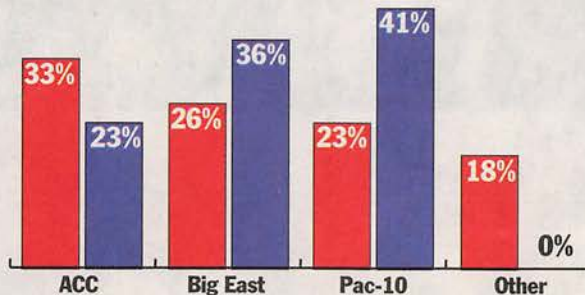
steroids thing, figuring it would go away (SN, February 25). Well, guess what—denying it to the press and his buddy Mike Wallace is not the same thing as denying it to a court or Congress. —gmc-nym86 via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

■ If Wrigley Field gets a corporate name, it will be the final step in the bastardization of baseball. I got the chance to go to Wrigley once. It was awesome. It would lose something for me to say, “I went to watch the Cubs play at Boeing Field or Oprah Park.” —bocephus0697 via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

## POLLING PLACE

Which conference is the best in college basketball?

■ SPORTINGNEWS.COM MEMBERS  
■ SPORTING NEWS STAFF



## BLOG ON

From your blogs on [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com)

### RE: THE BEST MONTH

Posted by lanz1

March brings more than baseball. The NHL starts ramping up its level of play. Teams jockey for their final seedings in the NBA. And is there anything more fun than March Madness? Even if you're a fan of a powerhouse team, don't you find yourself rooting for the mid-major school making some noise? It's just a fun month.

### RE: SILENT MAJORITY

Posted by Maize&BlueinKY

Sadly, the actions of a few corrupt, prima donna athletes taint the general perception about thousands of student-athletes. For every Reggie Bush scenario, there are legions of clean-living, hard-working student-athletes who only benefit from having a scholarship.

### RE: ROLLING THE DICE

Posted by t\_durden\_23

If the Sabres do not make the playoffs, it will be because they made themselves worse at the trading deadline. Keeping Brian Campbell and making the playoffs was a viable option. They chose a different direction, and I just hope it works out.

## RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on [Sporting News Radio](http://Sporting News Radio)

**‘The way the Western Conference playoff race in the NBA is shaping up this season is just great. The stretch run will be as good as any race any sport has had in the past 10 years.’**

—Carl in New Orleans on Sports Sunday with Bob Berger and Bob Stelton





"The Mighty Quinn"  
Brady Quinn, Browns QB

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NFL

Boston College's Matt Ryan isn't the most gifted QB, but he's always had *it*—the

# Matt qu



intangible that separates

the Tom Bradys from the Ryan Leafs

*By Steve Greenberg*

*Photos by Jay Drowns*

quest

**Athletes**  
PERFORMANCE



**R**yan Purvis had somewhere else he needed to be. It seemed important enough at the time. So the junior tight end missed one seven-on-seven workout with teammates—*Hello? These things are voluntary!*—early last summer.

Nobody's perfect, right? But then his phone rang and, um, well, sheesh ... "Why weren't you there?" demanded his quarterback, Matt Ryan. His *friend* Matt Ryan, whose room Purvis had slept in on his first night on the Boston College campus, when Purvis was on a recruiting visit. "I told the coaches: 'You're going to have to do punishment drills at 5 a.m. every day for a week.'"



Purvis felt chills. "I'm just pulling your chain," Ryan told him, "but you know we need everybody there."

"I got the message," says Purvis, who became an All-ACC first-teamer in 2007. "Matt gave his all to this team, and he expected everyone around him to give their all."

Purvis' name might as well have been pulled from a helmet because anyone who has played with Ryan has a memory of motivation to share. Known as "Ice" back home in Exton, Pa., and by his former teammates in Chestnut Hill, Ryan—a 6-5, 230-pounder who soon will feel the heat as the first quarterback taken in next month's NFL draft—is calm, collected and, indeed, sometimes cold.

Blessed with the ability to see his own flaws, he expects perfection from no one. But scholarly preparation and exhaustive physical effort are mandatory in Ryan's world. Anything less, and he'll get to you before the coaches will.

"I've never been afraid to step into that role," Ryan says. "Guys know I'm demanding and tough. It's part of being a quarterback. It's part of who I am."

Most NFL people are all right with Ryan's not being the biggest, the fleetest or the strongest-armed quarterback in the draft, although he certainly is talented enough, by any measurable, for the pro game. What sets him apart is simply everything else. The months he played on a broken foot as a junior. The 11 wins he piled up as a senior carrying a BC offense that lacked a single other significant pro prospect at the skill positions. The comebacks. The confidence. The preparedness, professionalism and maturity he has shown in interviews with every team.

And, perhaps more important than any of that, NFL people are unanimous in their belief that Ryan, as a 23-year-old rookie, will stare into the eyes of 10 teammates, no matter their ages, and instantly answer any questions about who's in charge.

"As long as it's understood that I'm prepared and I don't have any questions out there, then nobody else needs to talk," he says. "Just get in there and listen to what you're supposed to do."

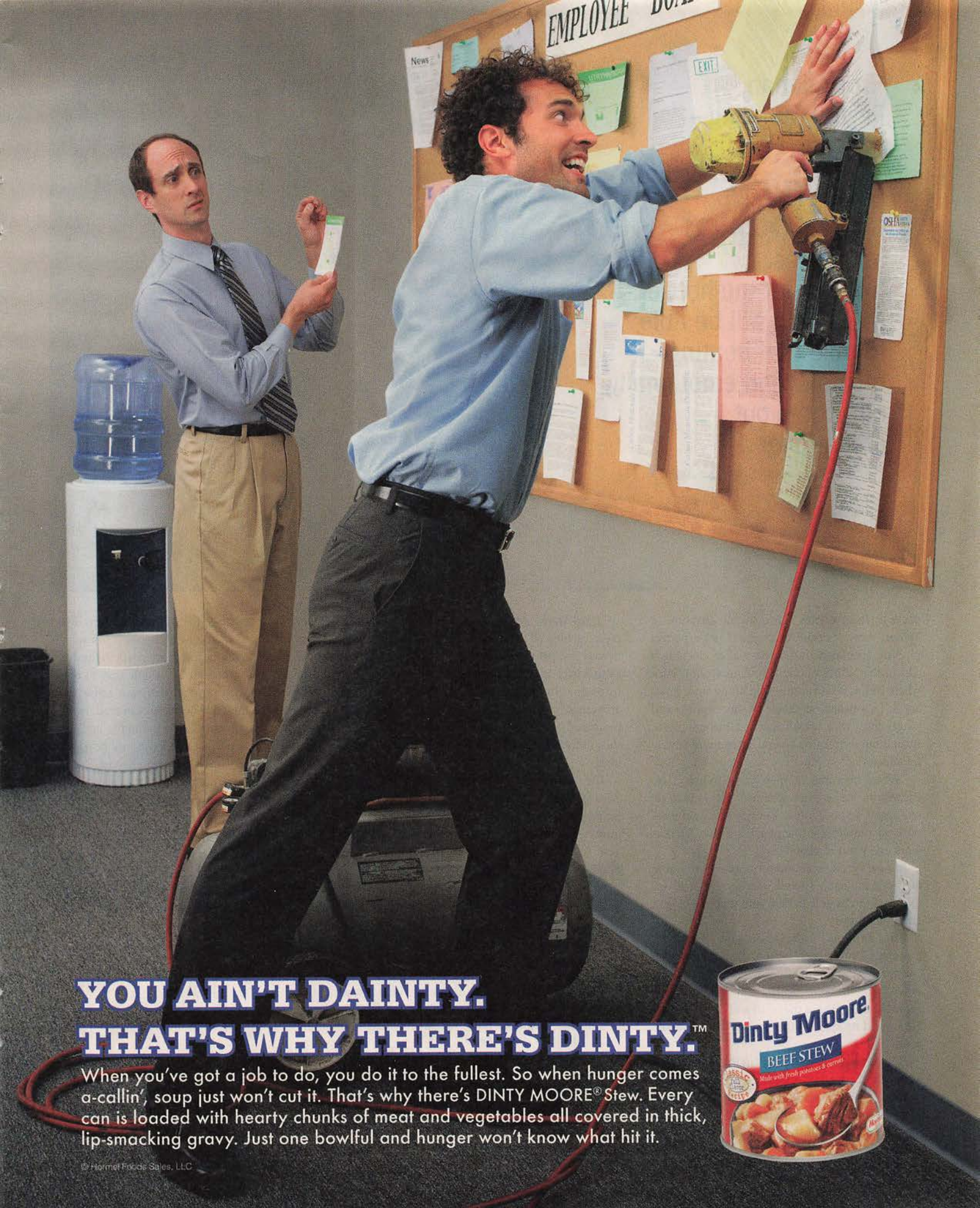
Presence. Poise. Leadership. Ryan has it all, and he most definitely has "it." Coming out of his ear holes.

## Born to lead

Ryan kicks his feet out to the sides when he runs. It's really kind of goofy-looking. Watching him run sprints as he trains with a group of elite draft pros-

**OK, so Ryan doesn't have an Elway gun or Vick wheels. What he does have is the aura to bring a team together at the end of a game and get stunning results.**





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'Troy Aikman,  
Peyton Manning—  
they got  
**the living daylights  
beat out of them**  
as rookies.

I would bet the house  
Matt Ryan will be able  
to take that beating,  
mentally and emotionally,  
and come out  
of it stronger.'

—BC offensive coordinator Steve Logan



pects at the Athletes' Performance Institute in Tempe, Ariz., it's plain to see he is not a perfect physical specimen. A few days after clocking a 4.88 at the NFL Scouting Combine, Ryan is back where he has been running and lifting since January 3. In a hellish sequence of short sprints and longer jogs, with breaks that last mere seconds, Ryan is outperforming several faster, more powerful athletes.

"When he came in here," says trainer Luke Richesson, "he had that attitude of, 'I'm here to get stronger. I want to work. Put me with the wide-outs, put me with the linemen, I don't care. I'll out-work every son of a bitch here.'"

But perfect, Ryan has never been. His first year of youth football, "I stunk," he says. "But it was important to be able to deal with that." Next year, far different story.

After growing 3 inches leading into his sophomore season in high school basketball, Ryan "would be running the floor and literally just fall down," says his father, Mike. "But then he would get to the other end of the court and drop a 3-ball." He wound up starting that season for the varsity team.

As a junior, he had a fastball in the high 80s but a curve and a splitter that tended to stay flat, so he pitched in relief. As a senior, he was the horse in the rotation. Not to mention a third-year starting quarterback and the team captain in all three sports.

"Hard work," Mike Ryan says. "It has been a piece of him all of his life. Matt has been very fiercely competitive for as long as I can remember. I think back to when he was 8, 9, 10 years old. He thrived on having the ball in his hands, without arrogance, cockiness or any of those things. It motivated him. You could see it, sense it. So could the other kids around him and the guys coaching him."

The many guys who hope to coach him in the NFL would happily abide Ryan's physical imperfections—the somewhat heavy feet, the still-lanky frame—in exchange for his "it." But there remains

one bright red flag: the 19 interceptions Ryan threw as a senior. According to one scout who is not sold on him as the top quarterback in the draft, Ryan is mistake-prone and "a little easy to read." But the scout, after poring over Ryan's game tapes, has not determined *why* he's easy to read; he also compares Ryan's arm to Tom Brady's and says, "Even if he'll never be a superstar, he'll be a good, solid starter. He won't allow himself to fail."

Cue last season's comeback in the final minutes at Clemson, with a trip to the ACC championship game at stake. Before the drive started at the BC 29-yard line, Ryan, who had been intercepted once

## >This is ... Matt Ryan

**Last track I loaded on my iPod:** "Bullet and a Target" by Citizen Cope.

**Best movie I saw recently:** *National Treasure: Book of Secrets*.

**My favorite thing about training for the draft:** Getting to know the players I've watched on TV the last few years.

**One thing I won't miss about this time in my life:** Being away from family and friends.

**I grew up as a fan of:** The Philadelphia Eagles.

**My philosophy on interceptions:** You have to be willing to put yourself out there and fail. You have to continue to take chances.

**Five years from now, you'll find me:** As a starting quarterback in the NFL.

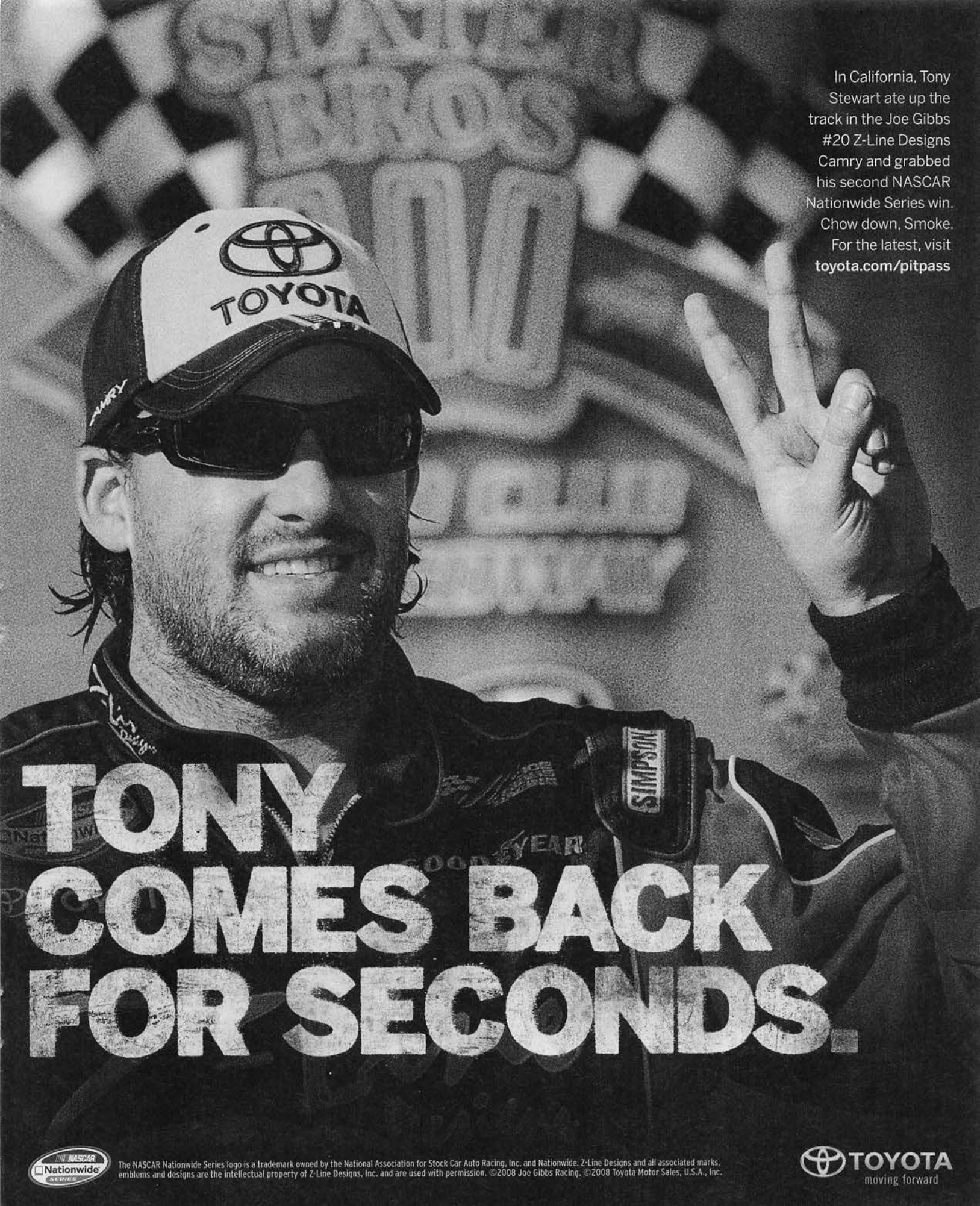
**On the dreaded B-word:** Bust? I don't think negative thoughts. At least I try not to.

**On sharing a town with Tom Brady:** It's his town. I don't think he knows who I am.

**On dating celebrities:** I've been dating a girl for a while, so I don't see that happening. Her name is Sarah Marshall. She was the starting point guard for three years at BC. She's going to kill me when she sees this.



In California, Tony  
Stewart ate up the  
track in the Joe Gibbs  
#20 Z-Line Designs  
Camry and grabbed  
his second NASCAR  
Nationwide Series win.  
Chow down, Smoke.  
For the latest, visit  
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and battered for five sacks, stared at his teammates in the huddle. "Everyone was exhausted," recalls wideout Brandon Robinson. "He looked at us and said, 'It's time to man up. All the work we've put in, we've got to show it now. This is the drive.'"

"There was no doubt. He's the commander. He's Ice."

## Fireproof shell

There is only one thing better for a football player than capping a last-ditch drive with a mad scramble and a long touchdown pass to beat a favored opponent on the road on national TV. And that is to do all those things, then puke victoriously on the sideline in view of the cameras. Yes, last season's win at Virginia Tech was the defining public moment in Matt Ryan's career.

But it doesn't come close to what Ryan did two years and two months before then. You want leadership? After Ryan, a sophomore, lost the battle with fifth-year senior Quinton Porter for the starting job—a battle Ryan still feels he should have won—several teammates had his back. They threw their arms around his shoulders and said BC's coaches had picked the wrong guy. They were ticked off.

Ryan told them they were dead wrong.

"Listen, the coaches made a decision," he told them. "I can respect that, and so should you. I don't want any sympathy. I've got to adapt to the responsibility of starting the season as the backup."

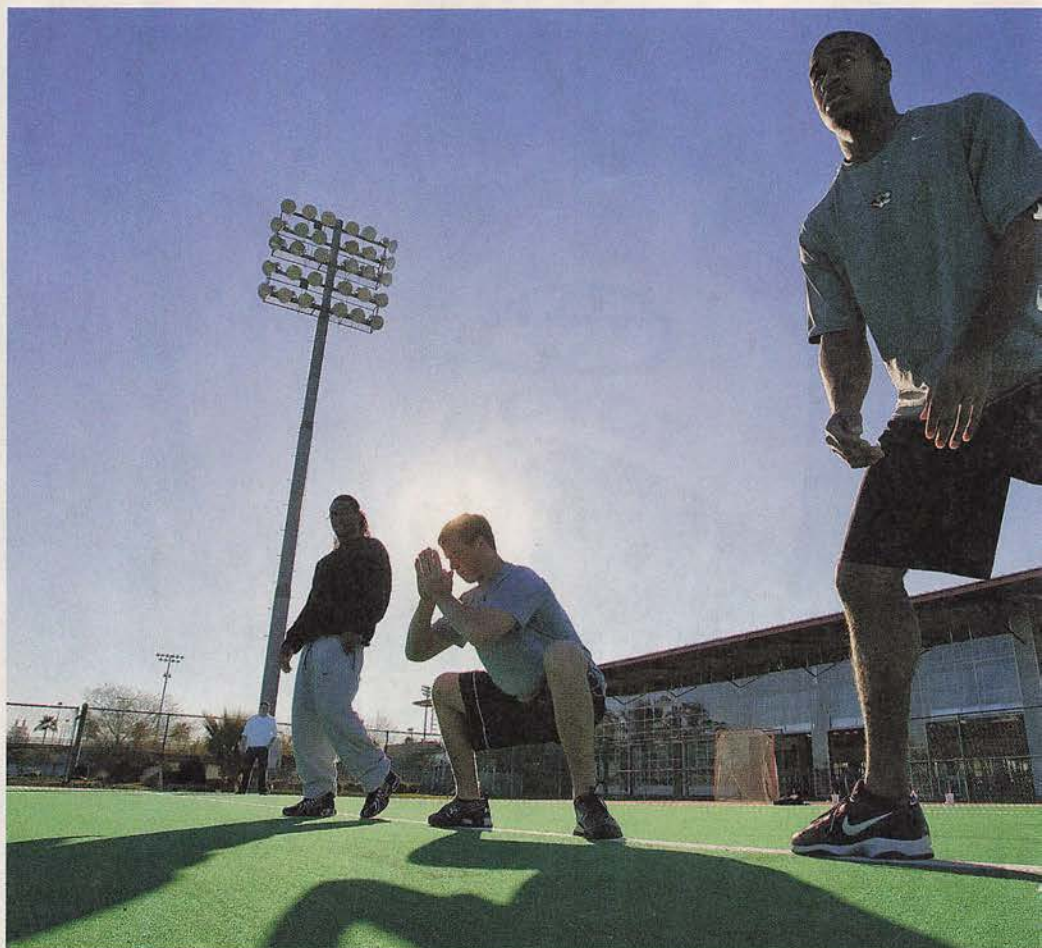
Most NFL people are confident Ryan would handle such a situation as a rookie with similar equanimity. But a growing camp considers him the only quarterback in the draft who could handle being a starter out of the chute.

"Matt's got the personality to withstand what's going to be a firestorm either way, because it's going to be a bad team," says BC offensive coordinator Steve Logan. "Troy Aikman, Peyton Manning—they got the living daylight beat out of them as rookies. I would bet the house Matt Ryan will be able to take that beating, mentally and emotionally, and come out of it stronger."

He has been gearing up for it since he was a boy. But in Tempe, before most college students have gotten out of bed, he is resting his body in the Athletes' Performance pool following another grueling, early-morning workout. Richesson marches over and prescribes 10 minutes in the cold tub, pronto.

"Ten in the cold?" Ryan gasps. "That's not cool, man."

The heat will be on him soon enough. **SN**

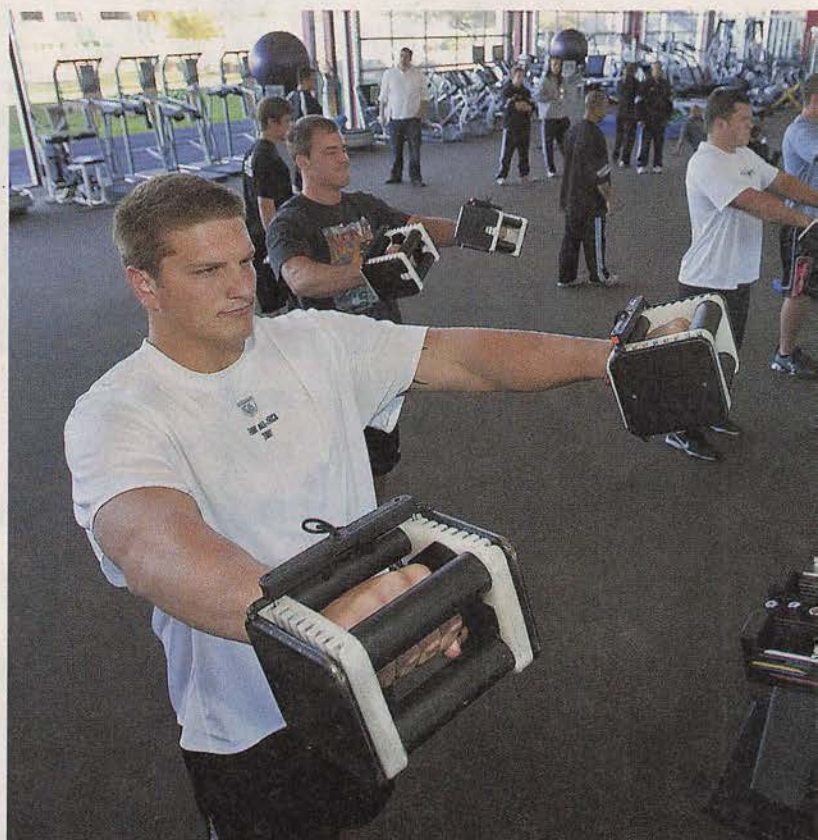


### Sun up, toes out:

Ryan (above, middle) stays in perfect balance while working on his hip mobility. What—did you think he was praying for rain? To his left: Missouri tight end Martin Rucker, a possible Day 1 pick.

### Long and strong:

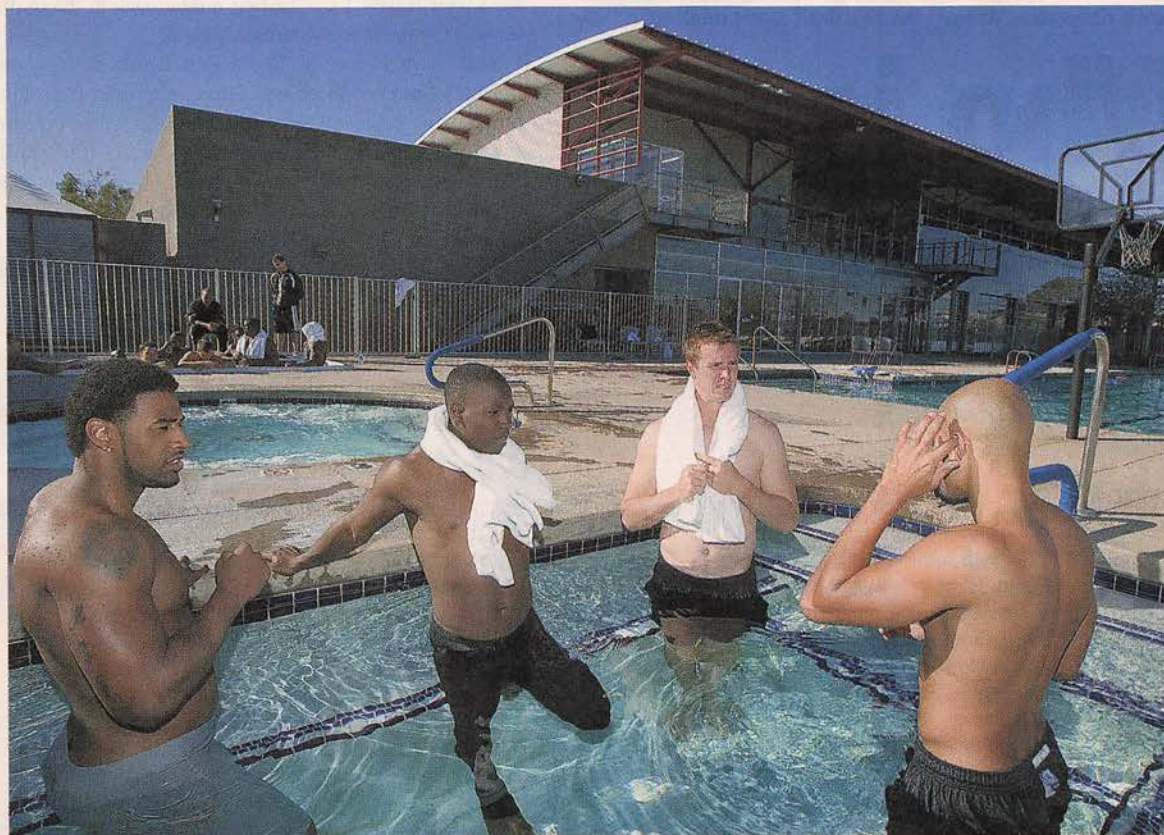
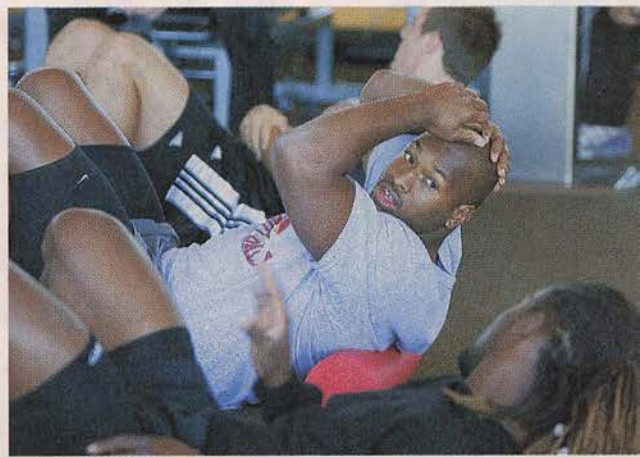
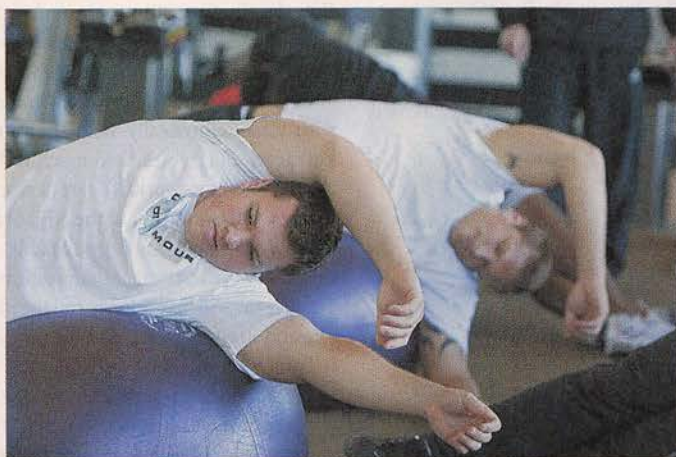
Michigan offensive tackle Jake Long—a first-round "freak," according to trainer Luke Richesson—readies his shoulders for battles in the trenches.





# After the bowls, before the draft

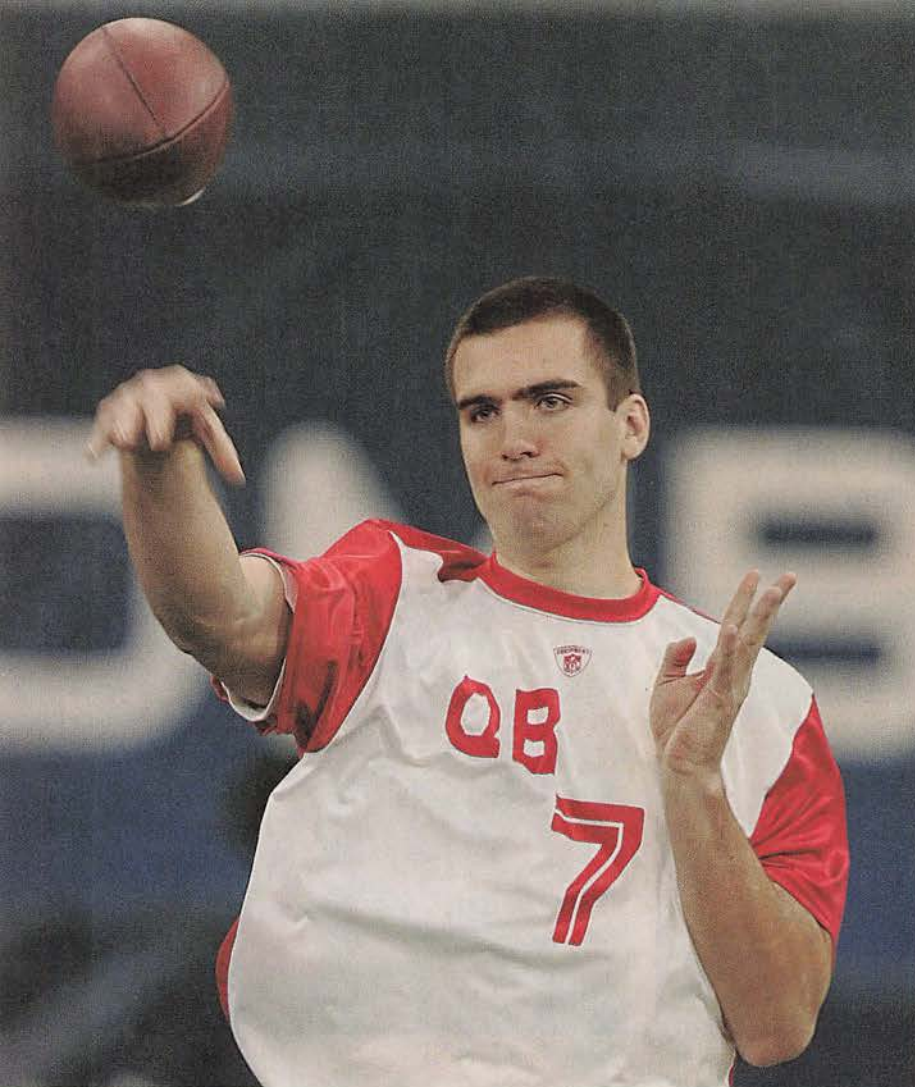
At the Athletes' Performance Institute in Tempe, Matt Ryan and a team of high-end prospects have spent the past two months working their bodies like never before



**Ballers:** Arizona State center Mike Pollak and Long (above, at left) stretch their upper-body muscles, which are still sore from the Combine, where they put up 225 pounds on the bench a combined 66 times. Above right: USC defensive end Lawrence Jackson, a likely first-day pick, works the foam roll to improve the flexibility in his back.

**Mr. Cool:** Ryan takes 10 in the cold plunge to reduce inflammation in—no, not his ego—his joints.





Flacco is armed, and apparently dangerous. At least the NFL draft gurus think so.

# Who is this guy?

Meet Joe Flacco, one of the best darn quarterbacks in the NFL draft *By Steve Greenberg*

## Small but mighty

Delaware's Joe Flacco isn't the only under-the-radar prospect with legitimate hopes of being drafted in the first or second round.

■ **Dexter Jackson, WR, Appalachian State.** After getting a late invitation to the East-West Shrine Game, Jackson was clearly the best receiver there from the get-go. That performance propelled him to the Senior Bowl and the Combine, where he also stood out. He has soared from a likely rookie free agent to a possible second-round pick.

■ **Josh Johnson, QB, San Diego.** Johnson is flying up draft boards after a season in which he threw 43 touchdowns and one interception. He followed that with a tremendous Shrine Game and Combine, so if the top of the second round is a stretch, it's not much of one.

■ **Shawn Murphy, G, Utah State.** Former major leaguer Dale Murphy's son switched from defensive line to offensive line for his final two years of college and looks like he has been playing there forever. He is an aggressive blocker whose best football is clearly ahead of him; don't be surprised when he outperforms many of the guards drafted before him.

■ **Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, CB, Tennessee State.** In college, Rodgers-Cromartie often got beat by receivers who will never play in the NFL. But he started climbing draft boards with an excellent Senior Bowl week and then broke out at the Combine. He has premier playing speed and athleticism—and he's 6-1½.

—War Room scouts

**A**t the intersection of hope and hype stands Joe Flacco. Who? Joe Flacco, a 6-6, 234-pound quarterback from Delaware who talks the talk, quite possibly can walk the walk and has every NFL personnel man with a pulse trying to make sense of his spiraling rise up draft boards across the league.

A year ago, Flacco says he "would have been happy to even be talked about" as a draft prospect. Now he is banking on being a first-day pick. "I'm hearing probably the same thing everybody else is hearing. Anywhere from the late first to the early second round."

It is not a stretch to say Flacco, who put on a show with his legs and arm at the NFL Scouting Combine, could follow Matt Ryan and Louisville's Brian Brohm and be the third quarterback drafted. Flacco's agent, Joe Linta, says going first among quarterbacks is not completely out of the picture. But, alas, that scenario is even more far-fetched than, say, a sixth-round pick from Michigan leading a team to three Super Bowl wins and shacking up with a supermodel.

Says one scout: "There are some people that are in love with Flacco. Physically, neither Ryan nor Brohm is at that kid's level. But he needs so much technique work, so much (help on his) footwork, it's sort of scary."

But we're talking about the NFL draft—the ultimate game of craps. Flacco's talent is undeniable, and it should be noted that Delaware is stronger than some bowl-eligible programs. Some team will breathlessly roll the dice on a player with the size and strength to stand in the pocket and the wherewithal to launch a football 70 yards.

Heck, maybe 75 yards. Anyone for 80?

"I don't think my arm strength is the best thing about me, anyway," says Flacco. "I like to believe I have good pocket presence and good accuracy. And I have the confidence to say I truly believe I am the best quarterback in the draft. I aspire to be the first quarterback picked."

Linta says Flacco is "like a Ben Roethlisberger, only quicker." Not even Linta says Flacco, a transfer from Pittsburgh who threw for 4,263 yards as a senior, will be prepared to start as a rookie. But in fairness to Flacco—if not to Big Ben—who's really to say which players can make it huge and which can't even come close? The science of the NFL draft is famously, tantalizingly inexact.

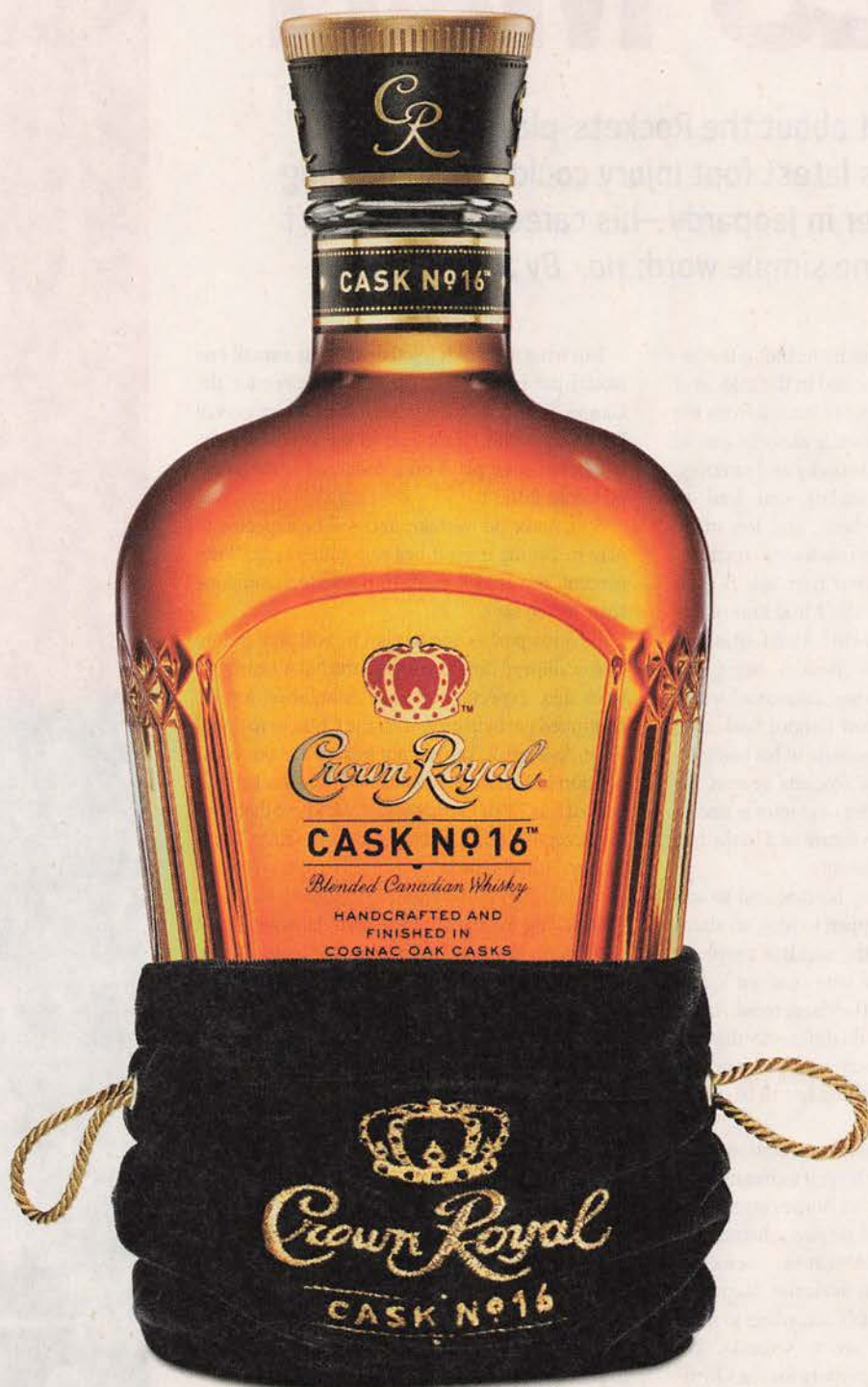
Meanwhile, Flacco is wisely playing this phase of the game as hard as he can. "I'm trying to give them as much as I can, show them my personality as much as I can," he says. "I'm not trying to hide anything. What you see of me is what you get. And the more you see, I think the more you're going to like me."

SN



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NBA

# YES MAN

Forget about the Rockets' playoff hopes. Yao Ming's latest foot injury could put something even bigger in jeopardy—his career—if he doesn't learn one simple word: *no*. *By Stan McNeal*

**O**ne of the 26 bones in the foot is the tarsal navicular. Located in the middle of the foot, a couple of inches from the big toe, the navicular absorbs untold pounding from running and jumping. Too much pounding can lead to microscopic cracks in the bone, and too many microscopic cracks will turn into a stress fracture.

When you're 7-6, 300, your navicular is even more susceptible to injury. Yao Ming knows this pain—one tiny stress fracture in his left foot is having gigantic repercussions. Besides being the NBA's top center, Yao is the most famous athlete in China and arguably the most famous basketball player on the planet. Now, because of his bad foot, Yao will miss the rest of the Rockets' season, his status for the Beijing Summer Olympics is uncertain and even his long-term future as a basketball player has to be viewed differently.

"Yao has done everything he can, and to still have something like this happen to him, an alarm has to go off in his mind, in the minds of people he trusts," says Jeff Van Gundy, who coached Yao in Houston for four seasons. "They have to ask themselves, 'What do we have to do differently that can prevent this without sacrificing performance?' I would be concerned. Everything has to be evaluated."

Unfortunately, the most obvious solution—rest—is hardly a possibility. The biggest tournament of Yao's life—the Olympics in his home country—is coming in five months, and he was scheduled to have surgery earlier this week to insert screws that will repair and strengthen the navicular. The injury will take four months to rehab, according to most doctors' estimates. If there are no setbacks, Yao will have about a month to prepare for the Olympics. He will proudly carry the Chinese flag into the National Stadium on August 8 and be ready one day later for the start of the basketball competition.

But what if there is a setback? Even a small one would put him at less than 100 percent for the Games. Just look at the years lost in the careers of Bill Walton and Grant Hill to see what happens when someone plays on a foot that is not completely healthy.

Still, make no mistake: Yao will be expected to play in Beijing even if he's not quite ready. "Fifty percent and they'll push him to play," someone close to Yao says.

If China pushes Yao to play, he will play. Before China allowed him to come to the NBA nearly six years ago, expectations were established for his continued participation with the Chinese national team. As a result, Yao has not missed a major competition in his five offseasons with the Rockets. "It is what it is," Van Gundy says. "We knew that, and we accepted that." Echoes Rockets G.M. Daryl Morey: "It's who he is."

**P**laying for the Chinese national team is not quite like playing for the U.S. team. At the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Yao's NBA colleagues on Team USA stayed on a luxury liner. The Chinese team stayed in the Olympic village. Yao was roommates with coach Del Harris and five others in a three-bedroom flat. Harris had a bedroom, then-assistant (and now head) coach Jonas Kazlauskas had a bedroom, and Yao and the team's starting point guard shared a bedroom. (Yao was afforded an extension on his single bed.) Three others slept on mattresses scattered about the living area.

"The Queen Mary, it wasn't," Harris says. "One of the showers broke, too, but they insisted that the coaches use the good one. The players continued to put up with the one that didn't work."

This year, Chinese pro teams have ended their season early so the national team can begin training later this month. China is expected to play a pre-Olympics schedule of about 30 games. The

The world is watching, and Yao (and his feet) are feeling the pressure.







## Of the four leg injuries Yao has suffered in the past two years, only one—a broken right tibia last season that was the result of a freak fall—could not be attributed at least partly to overuse.

U.S. team, meanwhile, will spend about three weeks together this summer before the Olympics.

The year he was China's coach, Harris had to buy his own video machines, do his own editing and find countries willing to lend him game tapes. Still, he coached the team to its greatest victory, an upset over then-world champion Serbia and Montenegro that put China in the medal round. Since that success, the Chinese have made numerous upgrades in their program at Harris' recommendation, such as hiring a full-time coach and buying their own video equipment. With these improvements come greater expectations for this summer, most of which are expected to be shouldered by Yao. "There's always considerable pressure on him," Harris says.

Yet Yao doesn't mind. Representing his country is his No. 1 basketball priority, as he noted when he said at the news conference last week that missing the Olympics would be "the biggest loss in my career." In 2004, Harris never heard a complaint from Yao or any of the other Chinese players. "They would never enter a building first," Harris says. "They always waited until I went in. They showed such great respect."

**V**an Gundy, now an ESPN analyst, was working out in a Houston gym last week when he heard a tap on the window. Yao wanted a word. "I'm out for the year," Yao told his former coach. The injury stunned the basketball world, but Van Gundy admits he was not shocked. He watched Yao miss 59 games over their last two seasons together, mostly because of foot and leg injuries.

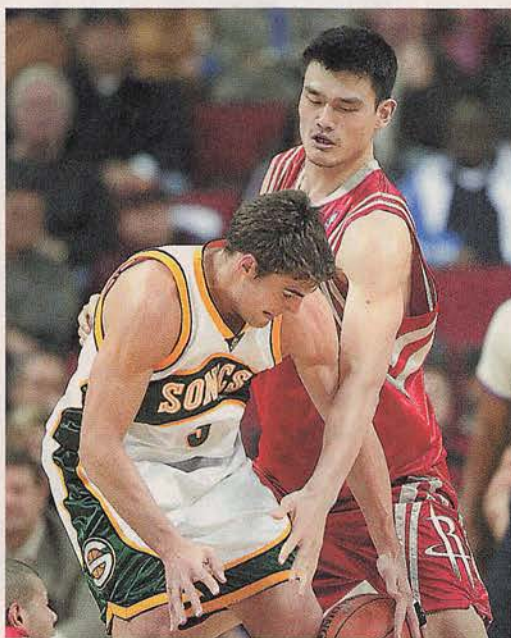
Van Gundy knows how much time Yao spends on the court and how much stress he puts on his size 18s. Yao usually was the first Rockets player on the floor for practice. "The best worker and the best teammate for a star player I've ever been around," Van Gundy says. "It's not even close."

Yao puts in the practice time because he is not as naturally gifted as most NBA players, Van Gundy says. He does all the right things off the court, too. For example, Yao weighs less now than he did as a rookie. After he finishes the marathon NBA season, he usually devotes a month to working with a personal trainer, which is in addition to his time with the Chinese national team.

Of the four leg injuries Yao has suffered in the past two years, only one—a broken right tibia last season that was the result of a freak fall—could not be attributed at least partly to overuse. He has a

history of foot issues, too, that goes back to his days as a teenager with the Shanghai Sharks.

Lightening the load on Yao, 27, has long been a consideration for the Rockets. Van Gundy says team doctors have been "on high alert" for years in regard to Yao's feet. Under Van Gundy, the Rockets had more days off than most teams because of injury concerns with Yao as well as Tracy McGrady. Van Gundy's successor, Rick Adelman, is not known for Pat Riley-like practices, either. Another option would be for the Rockets to play Yao less than a full NBA season, a possibility that Morey does not dismiss. "If our doctors recommend changes, we'll listen to them," he says.



**When he's healthy, Yao is the most dominant center in the NBA.**

The Rockets, however, do not plan to change their long-range plans because their two best players can't stay on the floor. Their championship hopes this season were crushed because of Yao's injury, but Morey intends to have Yao and McGrady front and center next season. "You need elite players to win in the playoffs, and they are elite players," Morey says.

Of course, Yao can't be elite if he's unable to play. "The thing is, it's in everyone's best interest for him to be healthy," Van Gundy says. But more than the Rockets, more than the NBA, more than even his homeland, Yao should be the one to determine his future.

"By nature, he's a yes guy," Van Gundy says. "It's not easy for him to say no."

Hopefully he'll learn before it's too late. **SN**

## Something had to give

Given Tracy McGrady's and Yao Ming's history, the Rockets figured there would be injuries. First-year general manager Daryl Morey says he assembled the roster around his two max-contract players, knowing they were about as likely to play in all 82 games as he was.

When the Rockets won seven of their first nine games during a stretch with McGrady sidelined, Morey was looking good. When McGrady returned, the Rockets took off, going undefeated in February and climbing into a playoff spot in the difficult West. Then Morey was looking *really* good. "We were just starting to let ourselves believe that we were one of the teams who could win the West," Morey says.

Then the big shoe dropped last week, and now reaching the playoffs has become a challenge few outside of Houston believe the Rockets can handle. "It's sad because they had been playing so well," a Western Conference exec says. "But as tough as the West is, you've got to believe they're done."

Three reasons to listen to the scout:

### Not enough offense

With an average of 22.0 points, Yao was the leading scorer on a team with only two others in double figures. His replacement in the starting lineup, Dikembe Mutombo, had scored seven points all season before Yao went out. As well as power forward Luis Scola has played since moving into the lineup, his 11.8 points per game as a starter don't exactly put him with the league leaders.

### Too much time

Despite their fabulous February, the Rockets have been able to move up only three spots in the West—from 10th to seventh—and they began March with just a 3-game lead over the ninth-place Nuggets. Of the Rockets' final 23 games, nine are against the West's top eight teams.

### The remaining star

Everyone around the league knows McGrady has the ability to carry a team, but is he driven enough? In conversations with scouts and execs, McGrady's motivation often comes into question. And can he stay healthy? He already has missed 15 games this season with a body as fragile as the Rockets' playoff hopes without Yao.



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While driving the  
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# An inside job

Freshman Kyle Singler has embraced his role as Duke's defensive enforcer in the post. Yeah, he's still working on the look. *By Mike DeCourcy*



Singler will never be confused with Mike Gminski, the best true center ever to play at Duke, but he is giving the Blue Devils a much-needed inside presence on defense.



**H**ere it is, captured in 5 short seconds of Duke's brutal, late-night ACC victory over Georgia Tech, the full breadth of the myriad skills freshman Kyle Singler carried with him onto the Blue Devils roster:

**11:10:** Singler, a 6-8 forward, gets switched defensively onto Georgia Tech point guard Maurice Miller. No reason to panic; it's part of the plan.

**11:09:** Singler's length helps force an errant Tech pass that Blue Devils wing Gerald Henderson saves inbound.

**11:08:** Always alert, Singler retrieves the ball

near the center of the court.

**11:07.5:** Singler snaps a pass to point guard Greg Paulus, then takes off on a fast break.

**11:05:** Singler fields Paulus' cross-lane feed and draws a foul, then steps to the line and extends Duke's lead with a free throw.

All of this is what Singler imagined when coach Mike Krzyzewski first approached him about joining the Blue Devils. But there has been more to the bargain, and it is as plain as the chronic scratch that adorns his chin like a blood-red goatee. Weighing 220 pounds, looking more like 120, Singler has been required to be as much Ben Wallace as Gerald Wallace.

Singler came to Duke when 6-10 Josh McRoberts was on his way out and 7-1 Brian Zoubek was entering a sophomore season that would be slowed by injury. This means Singler frequently has had to operate as Duke's big man. He doesn't function as a center on offense, but when the other team's center is functioning as a center, somebody's got to guard that dude on the block. Saturday night, Singler will, for the second time, bump into powerful North Carolina All-American Tyler Hansbrough in a game that will decide the ACC regular-season championship.

"He takes a beating every game," says teammate Jon Scheyer. "I feel like it's an everyday thing. Every guy he goes up against pretty much is bigger. He goes in there scrapping and making tough plays inside."

If a McDonald's All American with Singler's size (limited) and skills (unlimited) were asked to do that, the typical reaction would be to scoff, gripe and sic either his parents or AAU coach on the coach with the audacity to make such a request. Frequently, that's how it goes—even when it's a 6-10 prospect who is being asked to play close to the goal.

Singler frequently plays alongside 6-8 Lance Thomas or Zoubek, which relieves some of the burden. And it's not as though Singler is handcuffed to the baseline when the Devils have the ball. Duke's offense frequently employs four or five players with perimeter skills, Singler being one, and emphasizes ball screens that make excellent use of his shooting ability. Averaging 14.3 points, Singler fires nearly half his shots from 3-point range.

His personal sacrifice comes at the defensive end. He says, "I don't mind defending the post. It's something I have to do. I don't really take the approach that I'm thrown in, that I'm thrown to the dogs. It's not really tough. I'd much rather be on the court than off the court."

This battling with beasts is not entirely new. At

South Medford High in Oregon, Singler had a sizzling rivalry with UCLA freshman Kevin Love, who played at Lake Oswego. They met each year in the state tournament, with each winning twice.

At Duke, though, there's a big body in almost every game: Maryland's Bambale Osby, Clemson's Trevor Booker and, of course, Hansbrough. Singler survives like one of those slippery running backs who won't let anyone get a clean hit on him. The key weapon he brings to these meetings is the ability to create mismatches by using guard-type skills on the perimeter.

"He's a good player. He can do a lot of different things," says Hansbrough, who was stung once or twice by a Singler pick-and-pop when Carolina lost the teams' first meeting last month. "I think his shooting is better than a lot of people give him credit for."

There is more to Singler's confrontations than contending for rebounds and working to limit his opponent's production. He has to avoid exhaustion. He has to stay out of foul trouble. There's something else, too. Krzyzewski wants him to look the part. That's not easy. Singler's body is lean. He could use a few minutes in the tanning booth. His face looks like it belongs on a middle school safety patrol, not an NBA lottery pick.

So the coaches work on this. Really. When Krzyzewski has his weekly meetings with each player, part of Singler's session focuses on "having more of a solid look," as Singler says. In part because they have no singular superstar to carry their attack, the Devils tend to feed off one another's energy. But if

there were a perceived weakness or signal of retreat, it could work the other way, too, so Singler cannot allow himself to appear defeated.

When he is buried beneath the basket a few times on post-up moves by Tech freshman Gani Lawal, Singler grabs the ball out of the net and throws it inbound to start the offense. When he tries to shield muscular Jeremis Smith from interfering with DeMarcus Nelson's fast-break layup and is plowed into the photographers along the end line, Singler bounces quickly to his feet with a near-grin on his face.

"Singler is such a willing learner," Krzyzewski says. "He wants to know the nuances of the game—how you're supposed to feel at a certain time. It's important knowing time and score but (also) how you look during that moment."

"He's had as good a year as, I think, any freshman I've coached. I'm not saying he's going to be the best player. I know who he is. He's got gifts that don't have words. Whatever it is that a champion has, he's got it."

**SN**

BOB LEVERONE / SN



NHL

# THE snipers

Defining this hockey term is as tricky as pronouncing the names of many NHL goaltenders. But there's one thing everyone knows: These guys can put the puck in the net. *By Victor Chi*

**HE** has a Rocket Richard Trophy, four consecutive 40-goal seasons and a blistering shot. But does that necessarily make Thrashers left winger Ilya Kovalchuk a sniper? Depends on whom you ask.

"If you talk about a sniper, he's it," Flyers defenseman Kimmo Timonen says. "It comes off his stick so hard and fast, and you just hope it hits something on the way through—preferably the goalie."

But Sharks coach Ron Wilson has a different slant.

"Kovalchuk is obviously a tremendous goal scorer, but I don't view him as a sniper because he has all these long dashes up the ice, beating two or three people," Wilson says. "It seems to me that a sniper is a guy who appears and then—boom!—it's in the net. Brett Hull, Mike Bossy: Those are the true snipers."

*Sniper* might be the trickiest label in hockey because so many inside the game have their own standards and definitions. It is easier to fit players into other classifications. Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux were wizards. Pavel Bure was a speed demon. Cam Neely was a power forward.

But snipers? Defining the term is like interpreting the Constitution. There are justices who are loose constructionists and those who are strict. And then there are the centrists, which in this case is Sharks director of scouting Tim Burke.

"A sniper is a guy that doesn't need many chances," Burke says. "You have gunners who throw a ton of shots on net. They do score, but they need more shots. Kovalchuk is interesting because I can see him falling into both categories."

Capitals whiz kid Alexander Ovechkin was the first name mentioned by most NHL insiders who were asked to identify today's top snipers. Others mentioned frequently were





## Oh, shoot! Ovechkin has the right mentality



Anytime, anywhere—that's the shooting philosophy Alexander

Ovechkin lives by, which is probably why he has been tabbed as the top sniper in today's NHL.

The Capitals' talented left winger leads the league with 49 goals, but what makes him so dangerous is the number of ways he can beat a goaltender. Wrist shots, slap shots, highlight-reel dashes and dirty-work rebounds from in close—any and all are possible for the 22-year-old Russian.

"He is probably the most dangerous player in the NHL," Thrashers coach and general manager Don Waddell says. "He finds ways to get open, and he has a great release. He uses players as screens as well as any player in the league."

Ovechkin is a volume shooter. He led the league in shots in each of his first two seasons, and he's comfortably in the lead this year. He fires away from all angles, surprising goaltenders as well as teammates.

Ovechkin has two four-goal games this season, but his strength is consistency. He has scored in more games than any other player.

"I'm glad people believe I'm a good shooter, good scorer. It is a little bit luck, good partners—little things, but they turn into big things," Ovechkin says. "If you don't shoot, you don't have a chance to score."

It's a simple philosophy—one that works well for him.

"His shot amazes people every day," says teammate Tom Poti. "He can pretty much put it exactly where he wants it, and his wrist shot is just as hard as half the guys' slap shots."

—Corey Masisak



Kovalchuk, Jarome Iginla (Flames), Teemu Selanne (Ducks), Dany Heatley (Senators), Jonathan Cheechoo (Sharks), Vincent Lecavalier (Lightning) and Rick Nash (Blue Jackets).

Their skills might vary to some degree, but one they share is the ability to unleash shots in a flash.

## Tools of the trade

"I remember Grant Fuhr telling me that often it's the quickness of the shot that beats a goalie," says Iginla, who scored 52 goals in 2001-02. "It's not so much how hard it is. It's more the surprise and the speed of the release."

That's why a sniper needs a hard wrist shot in his arsenal. And the quickness to get it off in a flash—the vaunted one-timer.

"When I first came into the league, all I could do was take a big slap shot," says Hull, who, with 741 goals, ranks third all-time behind Gretzky and Gordie Howe. "But I found out if you're going to score goals, you have to know how to take a wrist shot. Get it away quick from 15 to 20 feet, especially late in my career when goalies were so ridiculous with all that equipment."

A deadly shot, though, is useless if a player can't get into position to uncork it. And that has become tougher in the past 15 years because coaches are so fixated on defense and scouting is so advanced thanks to technology.

Now, it all comes down to instinct, the ability to create space and get to open spots on the ice and a passion for scoring.

"Before, a sniper just used to be a goal scorer," Blue Jackets coach Ken Hitchcock says. "Now a sniper, if you look at all the goal scorers, is a power forward: Lecavalier, Ovechkin, Kovalchuk, Nash, Heatley. They're all big guys, powerful people that muscle their way into position to score. That's a change. It used to be a guy flying in on a breakaway or a 2-on-1. That doesn't happen very often now."

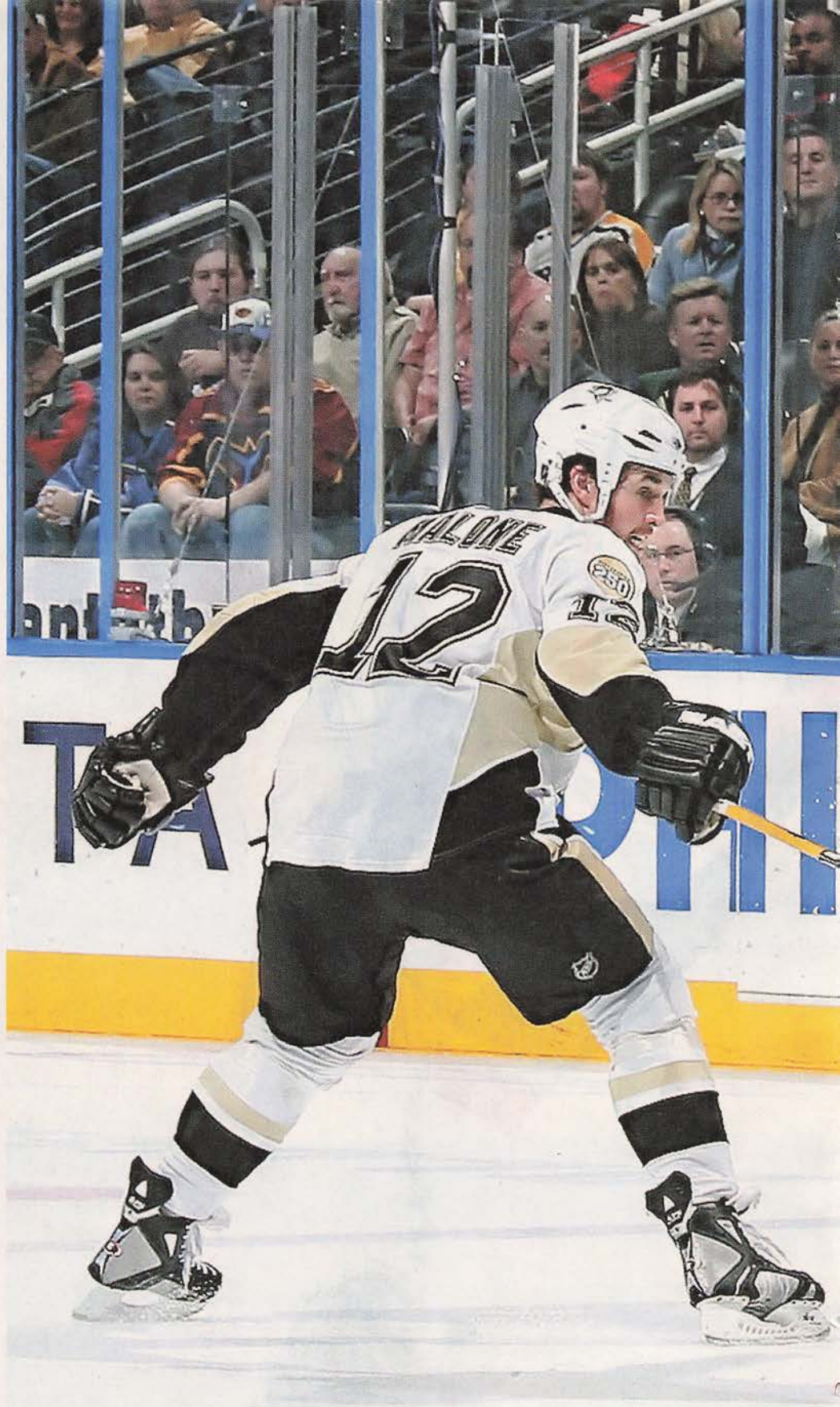
But Flames coach Mike Keenan says snipers can come in all shapes and sizes.

"I had Timmy Kerr in Philadelphia, and he was a big man," Keenan says. "But then there's someone like Michel Goulet who was quick around the net. Steve Larmer, Jeremy Roenick, Brett Hull, Brendan Shanahan, Jarome Iginla; I would consider them snipers. Rick Middleton was a nifty player. He wasn't a power forward, but he could find the net. Martin St. Louis is a little guy, but he's a sniper."

## The last of his kind

The one style that has been phased out of the game is what Kings defenseman Rob Blake calls "coming down the wing and blowing one by the goalie, like Guy Lafleur."

"To me, the last of that breed is Selanne," Hitchcock says. "He really changed his game. When he came back to Anaheim (as a free agent in 2005) and played with Andy McDonald and Chris



**When Kovalchuk (17) shoots, all a defender can do is hold his breath and hope it hits the goalie.**





SCOTT CUNNINGHAM / GETTY IMAGES

Kunitz, he was a different player than with Paul Kariya and Steve Rucchin (earlier with the Ducks in the late '90s). But he still knew where to go. He knew angles."

That's because a high hockey I.Q. is a major part of a sniper's M.O. As is a willingness to go where other players might not.

"Selanne used to always blow the zone early and got a lot of breakaways," Red Wings defenseman Chris Chelios says. "He timed it. You can call it anticipation. You can call it cheating. Whatever you want to call it, he had a knack for getting behind the defensemen. It's a sixth sense. All those sniper guys, they see things other players don't see. It's obviously something I don't see."

Snipers excel at reading a play and understanding where the seams in the defense will be. Hull was perhaps the best at appearing in the right spot at the right time to deliver a goal. The inability to recognize and then slip into an open space is what prevents an otherwise talented player from being a sniper.

"I watch the game, and I see more guys that should be able to score goals but don't have an idea of where to go to score goals," Hull says. "That's what kills me."

## A fine line

Pumping the puck into the net on a regular basis is not enough to earn sniper status, even though Rangers center Scott Gomez says, "Any guy now that gets 40 goals a year is a bona fide sniper." Penguins center Evgeni Malkin is on pace to crack 40 goals this season, but he can't see himself as a sniper.

"A sniper is a player who naturally feels where the puck is and can shoot it with his eyes closed and get it on net," Malkin says. "Ovechkin and Kovalchuk, for example. They are amazing. I don't consider myself a sniper. I see myself more as a playmaker."

Hitchcock has a similar thought about Malkin's teammate Sidney Crosby, the NHL's reigning MVP, scoring champion and marketing anchor.

"I don't consider Crosby a sniper," Hitchcock says. "He can score. But to be a sniper, you've got to be able to score from the top of the circles. Iginla could score from there when he was 16."

Sniper status can be so subjective that Ducks defenseman Chris Pronger says there is even a difference from conference to conference.

"It's interesting because I think guys in the East like Ovechkin and Kovalchuk and Lecavalier skate and carry the puck more before scoring," Pronger says. "In the West, it's more guys who set up shop in the slot like Cheechoo and Iginla."

"But they all still get the same end result." **SN**



## The best on the best

Six Norris Trophy winners share their views on snipers, past and present.



**Hull didn't score 741 goals by accident.**

**Randy Carlyle (1981).** "To me, that's Mike Bossy and Mike Gartner. Bossy might have been the most dangerous, but Wayne Gretzky wasn't bad with it, either. He scored 92 goals one year. That's a lot of goals. But with people defining him, would they say he's a sniper? He was a great player who could score."

**Doug Wilson (1982).** "If it's just purely a sniper and not a power forward, it's tough to go against Mike Bossy or Jari Kurri. Those were snipers with great triggers, great releases. But they also had the hockey sense to find the right area. They were great because everybody scouted them and everybody knew you had to try to stop them, but they still had the ability to score goals. They knew how to change the angle just enough to get shots through."

**Chris Chelios (1989, 1993, 1996).** "Brendan Shanahan and Brett Hull had the best shots I've seen in my career. It doesn't take a lot of shots with them. I judge snipers by what Hulle did. He didn't waste his shots. Other guys, say like Paul Kariya, he's got a great shot, but he shoots a lot, probably among the league leaders in shots. Would you call him a sniper? No, but he is a goal scorer."

**Rob Blake (1998).** "Luc Robitaille was probably the best I've played with. Joe Sakic is one guy you don't want to have taking a wrist shot on you. Most of the guys in this league, if you give them all the time in the world in the slot, they're going to beat the goalie. It's the guys who find that split second when it looks like they're covered and still find the net—those are the ones above the rest."

**Chris Pronger (2000).** "You can call it being in the right place at the right time, but they know where to be and that's why they're in the right place at the right time. That's Brett Hull. Those 700 goals aren't by accident. He had that quick release, and he was so accurate. Sometimes you'd rather give a good scoring chance to someone else than let Brett Hull have any chance."

**Nicklas Lidstrom (2001, 2002, 2003, 2006 2007).** "I've played against him and with him, and Brett Hull had that knack of finding that space. He didn't need much. He was the toughest one. Now you have less time and space with the puck than you used to. But with Brett, even if the pass was in his feet, he would find a way to get a good shot."

# The deadly dozen

Need a goal? You can't go wrong by getting the puck to these straight shooters, the NHL's top 12 snipers:

### 1 Alexander Ovechkin, Capitals.

Ovechkin, bidding to become the first 60-goal scorer since 1995-96, has the total package: a great shot, tremendous acceleration and a hunger to score.

### 2 Ilya Kovalchuk, Thrashers.

He has the wheels to fly past defenders, the skill to maneuver around them and the big shot to finish every play.

### 3 Jarome Iginla, Flames.

"Iginla is the best combination of a goal scorer because he can do it in the hard areas with rebounds and tips and the midrange areas in the circles," Tim Burke, the Sharks director of scouting, says.

### 4 Teemu Selanne, Ducks.

At 37, the Finnish Flash might have lost a step, but he's still a silky skater with smarts and quick, accurate hands.



### 5 Dany Heatley, Senators.

He's an explosive player with a quick trigger, which explains why he has posted consecutive 50-goal seasons.

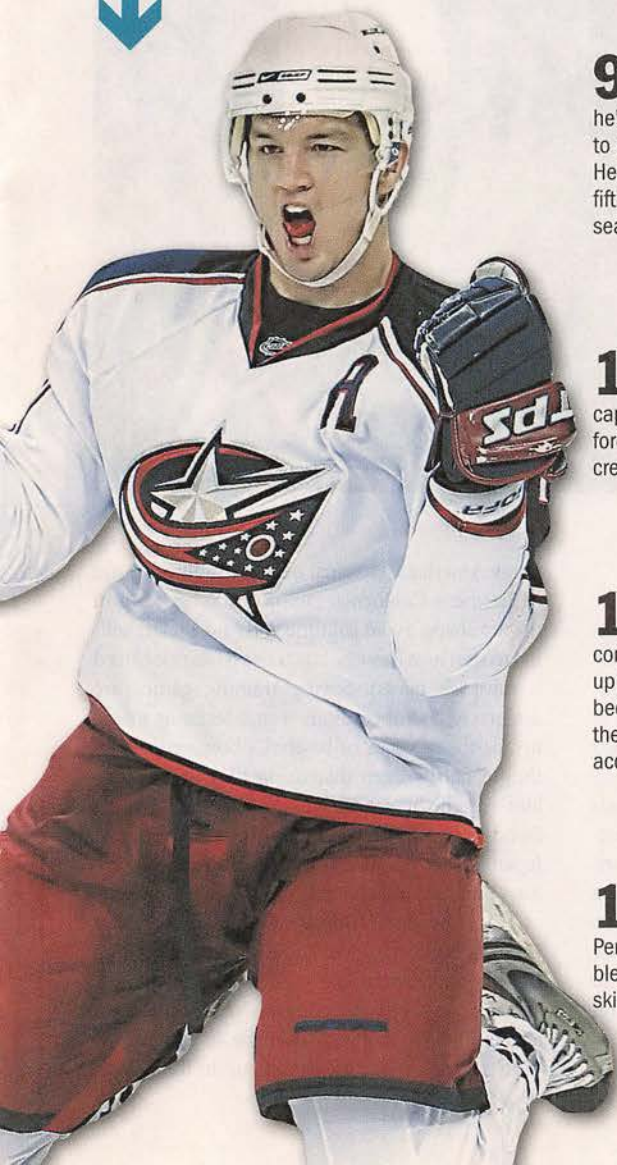




**6 Jonathan Cheechoo, Sharks.** He's not a great skater, but he has a nose for the net and a knack for finding the right spot. That leads to good things when you're skating with Joe Thornton.

**7 Vincent Lecavalier, Lightning.** Last year's leading goal scorer uses superior size (6-4) and vision to set up primo scoring opportunities.

**8 Rick Nash, Blue Jackets.** This impressive power forward dominates near the net and produces serious numbers without a prime setup man.



**9 Martin St. Louis, Lightning.** At 5-9, 185, he's fast and shifty enough to produce big numbers. He is pushing toward his fifth consecutive 30-goal season.

**10 Daniel Alfredsson, Senators.** Ottawa's captain is a well-rounded force with a relentless—and creative—approach.

**11 Marek Svatos, Avalanche.** He isn't concerned about setting up teammates, which is OK because he ranks fifth in the league in shooting accuracy.

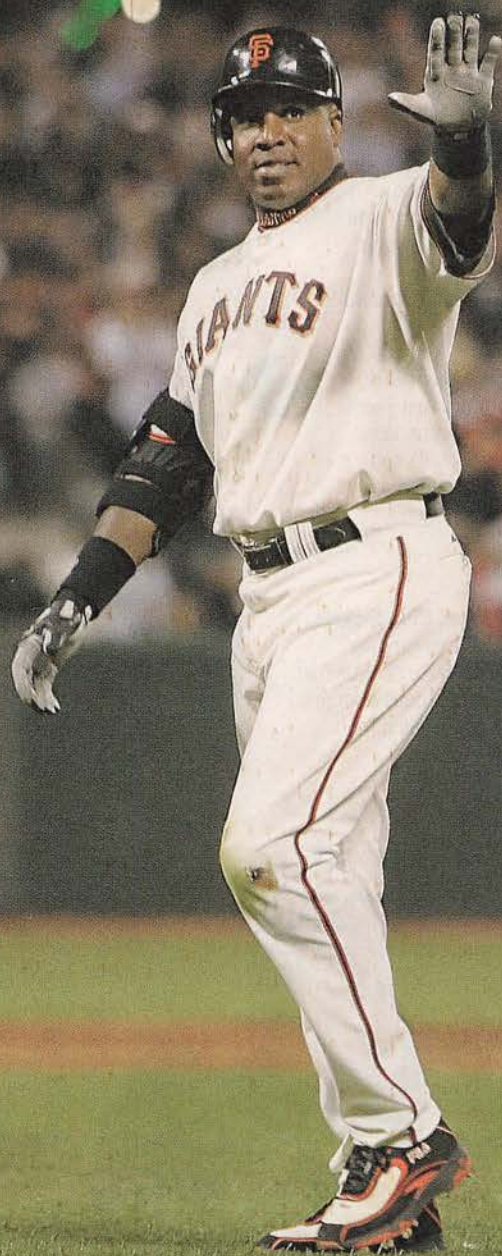
**12 Corey Perry, Ducks.** Only 22, Perry has an attractive blend of puckhandling skills and creativity.





Spring games are underway, and the game's all-time home run king is nowhere to be found. That's too bad.

## Adding Bonds just might make sense



### Loss of power

Barry Bonds hit nine home runs after turning 43 on July 24, 2007, a figure that ranks fourth among major league players at that age.

#### Career homers after age 43

Julio Franco	32
Carlton Fisk	22
Carl Yastrzemski	13
Barry Bonds	9
Cap Anson	7
Rickey Henderson	7
Tony Perez	7
Enos Slaughter	5

Source: David Vincent, SABR

By Sean Deveney

[sdeveney@sportingnews.com](mailto:sdeveney@sportingnews.com)

**T**he name Barry Bonds came up in the halls of the Tampa Bay Rays organization last week, and when that crumb of news tumbled out of the office and onto the pages of the *St. Petersburg Times*, baseball's observer class went bonkers.

Team vice president Andrew Friedman was sufficiently moved by the outcry to issue a statement calling the Bonds chatter a "nonstory." Manager Joe Maddon said, "It was thrown out there a little bit, and it's really not gone any further than that." Didn't matter—there were other important things to consider, like where Bonds would hit in the Rays' lineup and what impact he'd have on Rocco Baldelli.

Alas, Bonds remains unemployed. He, like so

many Americans, has just been bumming around in Southern California. On his to-do list: keep in tip-top shape, avoid jail time and find a team willing to sign him (how he has those goals prioritized is anyone's guess). Spring training games are underway, and not only are teams declining to line up for the services of baseball's home run king, they're hardly even discussing him. It looks so bleak on the big league front that someone in the Bonds camp has spread word he might head to Japan. That explains why a passing mention by the Rays qualified as big news.

This is, of course, Bonds' own fault. His reputation has been shredded, and he's the guy holding the pinking shears. His legal woes are his self-created mess. His objectionable clubhouse presence is his own making—over the last decade, he didn't have to make life as difficult in the Giants'

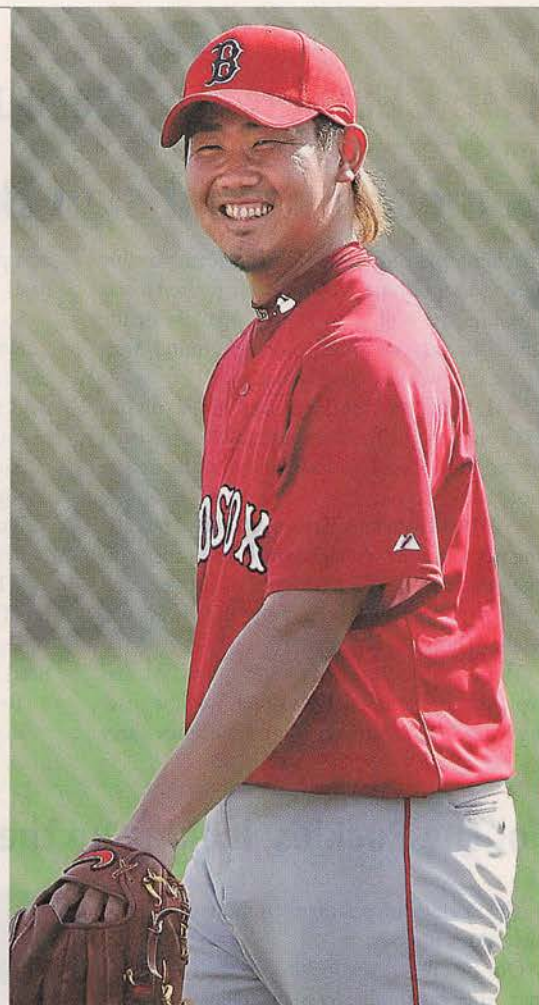


## >INSIDE DISH

Red Sox RHP **Daisuke Matsuzaka** is trying to refine his two-seam fast-ball, a pitch he didn't use much last year. One scout says that mastering the two-seamer could solve a major problem. "He had trouble with trying to be too careful to lefthanders," the scout says. "If he has a pitch he can bang in on the hands, it'll open more for him and he won't have to be so fine." Lefties hit only .238 against Matsuzaka in 2007, but they drew 50 walks. Matsuzaka walked only 30 right-handed batters. ➤ RHP **Matt Mantei** could get a chance to rescue the Tigers' bullpen. This year's setup crew is questionable because RHP **Joel Zumaya** (shoulder) is out until midseason and RHP **Fernando Rodney** (shoulder) is sidelined indefinitely. Mantei, who hasn't pitched since 2005, is throwing hard and hopes to regain the form he showed in 2003, when he struck out 68 batters in 55 innings and posted 29 saves for the Diamondbacks. ➤ New Giants hitting coach **Carney Lansford** is changing the team's approach entering the post-**Barry Bonds** era. With a lineup light on power, the Giants have been spending a lot of time on baserunning and situational hitting. It's a necessity. Gone are Bonds and 3B **Pedro Feliz**, who combined to hit 48 of the team's 131 homers last year.

That figure ranked 25th in the major leagues. ➤ One of the things players like about Padres manager **Bud Black** is his patience. SS **Khalil Greene** went through a nasty

slump last May, hitting .163, but Black kept him in the lineup and Greene hit .271 with 20 homers the rest of the way. "That's something you really appreciate," Greene says. "Everyone's going to have highs and lows, and everyone wants a chance to become more consistent." ➤ A subtle change in Florida: Manager **Fredi Gonzalez** has made sure all of his players will have iPods this year, so they can listen to their music with headphones. That's a new team policy after the departure of 3B **Miguel Cabrera**, who was known for blasting his boombox after wins. ➤ There has to be some frustration among Cardinals fans, whose team has been pinching pennies. The rotation is in tatters, with little depth behind RHPs **Adam Wainwright**, **Braden Loper** and **Joel Pineiro**. When three veteran free agents who could be potential innings-eaters—RHPs **Josh Fogg**, **Shawn Chacon** and **Jon Lieber**—saw their value drop, the Cardinals seemed to be a perfect destination. But they made no moves, and Fogg (Reds), Chacon (Astros) and Lieber (Cubs) all signed with other teams in the N.L. Central.



locker room as he did. When Ray Durham said last week, "It's definitely a little more relaxed around here," it was clear he meant life without Bonds is better than life with him.

Still, it feels wrong for Bonds to be on the sideline—or chasing yen across the Pacific. Maybe this is his karmic comeuppance. More realistically, it's probably a P.R. issue. Ask a veteran manager and he probably would tell you he'd like to see Bonds, even with his prickly persona at age 43, back in uniform. Tony La Russa pushed for his Cardinals to sign Bonds, only to be rejected by higher-ups.

Says Cubs manager Lou Piniella: "I don't know anything about the chemistry (issue). But I know when the Giants had Barry on the field, he was very productive. ... Let's hope he gets back to baseball."

"Look, he has had a great career. He is the all-time home run champion. I am sure he still has gas in his tank. At the same time, if he would want, he'd have a lot to impart to the young kids in the

game. I'm sure that, with the bat, he can still help some teams."

In the end, that's what matters. He could help a team like the Rays. Or the Royals. Or the Mariners. Or the Twins. If there is ever a time to take a gamble on Bonds, it's now, when he's getting desperate. If a team can sign Bonds on its terms, go for it. That means no \$10 million contract. That means Bonds takes the offer, contender or not. That means strict rules about showing up on time, taking batting practice with everyone else and, of course, no entourage, masseuses or locker area cordoned off with velvet ropes and bouncers in dark glasses.

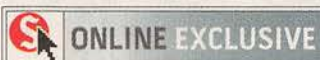
Bonds would bring media attention, sometimes unwelcome attention, as the Rays discovered last week. But that would fade. Bonds isn't chasing Hank Aaron anymore. Once the initial hype dies off, think about what you'd have: One of the greatest hitters of all time in your everyday lineup. **SN**

## speedreads

Talk of collusion has been floating around spring training. This has been a tough market for a lot of players, pitchers and hitters, but there is no basis for accusing teams of collusion. Hard times for veterans are more a reflection of teams' willingness to go with young players.

Roger Clemens showed up at the Astros' spring camp last week to work with some of the organization's minor leaguers. He has a personal services contract with the team, but what about the chances of him making another comeback this year? Absolutely zero.

Business is business, and Cubs owner Sam Zell has the right to sell the Wrigley Field name. But, remember, Zell bought the Tribune Co. and is looking to unload the Cubs. If he's only a temporary owner, he should have more respect for tradition and let the next owner decide whether to sell Wrigley's name.



Sean Deveney is traveling from camp to camp to provide in-depth spring training team reports. Check out your favorite team at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).



## THE CLOSER



Todd Jones

### Someone should sign Barry Bonds\*

When you heard the talk about a team possibly signing Barry Bonds, you probably figured it was a no-brainer. Well, a no-brainer one way or the other. There's not much middle ground with Barry. The two schools of thought:

■ **1. Sign him.** He's the greatest home run hitter of our time, he has done nothing that has been proved to be illegal, and he would put fannies in the seats.

■ **2. Don't sign him.** He's a cheater, and he's getting what he deserves. He's a clubhouse cancer, his legal issues would be a constant disruption, and this is a guy who always has been and always will be about himself.

Those are the choices. Now let's play G.M. and explore some options. First of all, we'll be playing A.L. G.M. because everyone concedes Barry

isn't physically able to play the field on a regular basis.

So who needs him?

How about the Yankees? Their clubhouse is used to drama, he'd like the short porch in right field, the Steinbrenners like to make a splash, and, of course, they could afford him.

Angels. Not a fit. Too many hitters and not enough spots.

Blue Jays. Frank Thomas is already there.

Red Sox. Heard of a guy nicknamed Big Papi?

White Sox. They have a big lefty bat at DH with Jim Thome.

Tigers. Jim Leyland likes Bonds but doesn't need him.

Twins. Keep dreaming.

Royals. Could work, surprisingly.

Rangers. Tom Hicks won't be starstruck again. Indians. Already good enough.

A's. His OPS and walks-to-strikeout ratio scream Billy Beane, but salary could be an issue.

Mariners. Their marketing department is so good that it could make fans like him.

Rays. They've talked about him.

Now let me be clear. Every team has probably *thought* about signing Bonds. After all, this industry has proved that as long as you can play, teams will look the other way when it comes to off-the-field stuff. The reason I believe Bonds hasn't signed is because teams don't know how many games he would play. Those perjury charges aren't going away, and that has clubs handcuffed.

The club that signs him would be putting a big stamp on its organization. It's still to be determined whether that would be a good stamp for forward thinking or a bad stamp for showing an unhealthy concern about the bottom line.

I'm not sure what the answer is, but it's an issue worth chewing on.

### For the Rockies, locking up their closer is a win-win situation

The Rockies are putting their money where their momentum is.

One by one, they're locking up their young stars. They gave outfielder Matt Holliday a two-year deal to avoid arbitration, shortstop Troy Tulowitzki a six-year contract and starter Aaron Cook a three-year extension. Now it's closer Manny Corpas who has a fresh four-year deal, an almost unheard-of contract for a relief pitcher with only 113 games under his cap.

It goes against the traditional logic of not giving a long-term deal to a young reliever, but it's another shrewd move by the Rockies. Corpas dominated hitters last year with his mid-90s fastball and devastating slider, first bullying his way into the primary setup role and then taking over for struggling/injured closer Brian Fuentes. Corpas finished with 19 saves in the regular season and five more in the playoffs. If he maintains that level of production, he'll be the biggest closer bargain in the majors.

And Casey Weathers, Colorado's first-round pick in the 2007 draft, could have his mid-90s fastball ready for a late-inning role within the next year or two. That would give the Rockies either a lights-out 1-2 combo or the flexibility to trade Corpas or Weathers to fill other needs that arise. Either way, it's an enviable situation.

—Ryan Fagan

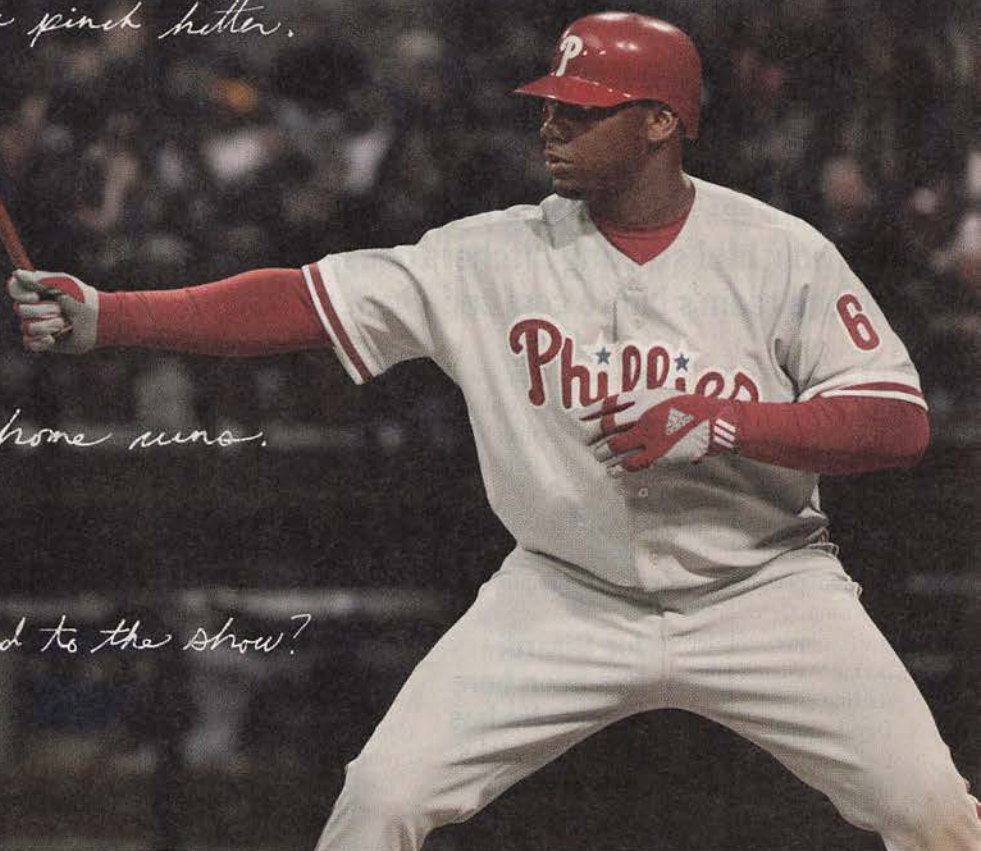


The Rockies saw enough of Corpas in his half a season as closer to offer him a long-term deal.



*You're playing in the minors.  
 You get the call. You strike out.  
 Two days later you get a single.  
 They keep you around. You're a pinch hitter.  
 You knock one out.  
 They put you in the lineup.  
 You knock another one out.  
 Next thing you know  
 You're Rookie of the Year.  
 The fastest man to 100 home runs.  
 The National League MVP.  
 But that's just me.  
 What will you do on your road to the show?*

*R. L. D.*  
 6



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# No place for old men ... or young ones

The Yankees' mix of aging position players and youthful starting pitchers doesn't bode well for the team's bid to contend *By Gerry Fraley*

**L**ike Joe Torre did more than a decade ago, Joe Girardi takes over a Yankees team in transition. It's the main elements that differ.

When Torre started his run as Yankees manager in 1996, the club had several young position players to go with older and wiser starting pitchers. The Yankees featured four position players 29 or younger, headlined by shortstop Derek Jeter and center fielder Bernie Williams. Four starting pitchers—David Cone, Dwight Gooden, Jimmy Key and Kenny Rogers—were 31 or older.

The mix of young legs and savvy arms worked well, triggering a run that produced four World Series titles in five years and 12 consecutive postseason appearances.

Girardi has the polar opposite.

His Yankees have aging position players and inexperienced starting pitchers. New York could have only two position players younger than 32: second baseman Robinson Cano, 25, and center

**Joe Girardi has been here before. He has seen the risks and rewards that come with inexperienced pitchers.**

fielder Melky Cabrera, 23. The Yankees' rotation might have as many as three young bloods: righthanders Phil Hughes, Joba Chamberlain and Ian Kennedy.

This seems more like a recipe for disaster than a way to build a contender.

The Yankees need the young pitchers to hold up for an entire season. They're asking a lot of Chamberlain, Hughes and Kennedy, who combined were 8-3 with a 3.19 ERA in 115⅓ innings last season.

"They deserve to be here," catcher Jorge Posada says. "They did a lot of things well toward the end of last season."

Chamberlain admits his peers could be oblivious to the pressure that comes with this duty.

"We're young enough not to really look into it but old enough to have an idea of what comes with being a Yankee," Chamberlain says.

Girardi has been here before. He has seen the risks and rewards that come with young pitchers.



**Chamberlain, 22, has won a spot in the rotation without having started a single major league game.**

## Just how raw are these guys?

In a radical departure from their tried-and-true method of building championship and contending teams with such veteran starting pitchers as David Cone, Jimmy Key, David Wells, Roger Clemens, Orlando Hernandez, Randy Johnson and Mike Mussina, the Yankees might thrust as many as three young pitchers into their rotation in 2008.

As talented as righthanders Phil Hughes, Joba Chamberlain and Ian Kennedy are, their inexperience just might show. Chamberlain, for instance, has never started a major league game. He is being converted into a starter following his dazzling performance as a reliever last season after he was called up from the minors.

The career workloads in Class AAA and in the majors for Hughes, Chamberlain and Kennedy entering 2008:

Pitcher, age	CLASS AAA			MAJORS		
	Games	Starts	Innings pitched	Games	Starts	Innings pitched
Phil Hughes, 21	5	5	28⅓	13	13	72⅓
Joba Chamberlain, 22	3	1	8	19	0	24
Ian Kennedy, 23	6	6	34⅓	3	3	19

—Joe Hoppel

He was catching for the Cubs when Mark Prior arrived in 2002, joining Kerry Wood to form a powerful combination that put the club on the brink of the World Series a year later before the two righthanders tailed off because of injuries.

Girardi managed the Marlins in 2006, when a collection of young pitchers kept the club afloat. Three of those players (Anibal Sanchez, Ricky Nolasco and Josh Johnson) broke down last season, when Girardi was no longer with the Marlins.

"You want them to be together for a long time," Girardi says. "Organizations count on these kind of guys to be there. When they're not, it's a big blow."

Young pitchers make up a big part of general manager Brian Cashman's master plan. If the plan holds, the Yankees will have more than 70 starts by pitchers 25 or younger this season. They last had 70 starts by pitchers 25 or younger in 1970. George Steinbrenner purchased the club before the 1973 season, and nothing has been the same since.

This year, things figure to be different. Quite different. **SN**



## For Lidge, there's even more to fight through

Closer Brad Lidge and the Phillies suddenly have two major concerns.

Besides dealing with his battered psyche, Lidge now has to contend with a repaired right knee. Are his mind and body strong enough to hold up in his new and demanding surroundings?

Lidge suffered the injury during a spring training throwing session, had surgery last week to remove torn cartilage and is expected to miss up to six weeks. He had bothersome damaged cartilage removed from the same knee after last season.

The injury derails the Phillies' spring goal of having Lidge practice working inside more often to righthanded hitters. The club believes Lidge has been predictable, working exclusively on the outside corner of the plate.

Lidge's absence also triggers a chain reaction that so far has stopped short of returning righthander Brett Myers to the bullpen. Setup man Tom Gordon will be the temporary closer. Gordon, 40, had 34 saves in 39 chances in 2006, but his health is problematic, too. He has been on the disabled list in each of the past two seasons.

The Phillies acquired Lidge, 31, from Houston last November so they could

put Myers, who had 21 saves in 24 chances last season, back in the rotation. After Lidge was injured, Philadelphia cut off speculation about another switch by naming Myers its opening day starter.

Lidge's career has been a bumpy ride since he gave up a ninth-inning home run to the Cardinals' Albert Pujols in Game 5 of the 2005 NLCS and lost twice in that fall's World Series. In the past two seasons, he was removed from Houston's closer role four times by Phil Garner.

"There's always a risk no matter who you're dealing with," Phillies general manager Pat Gillick says. "But we're comfortable taking it with him."

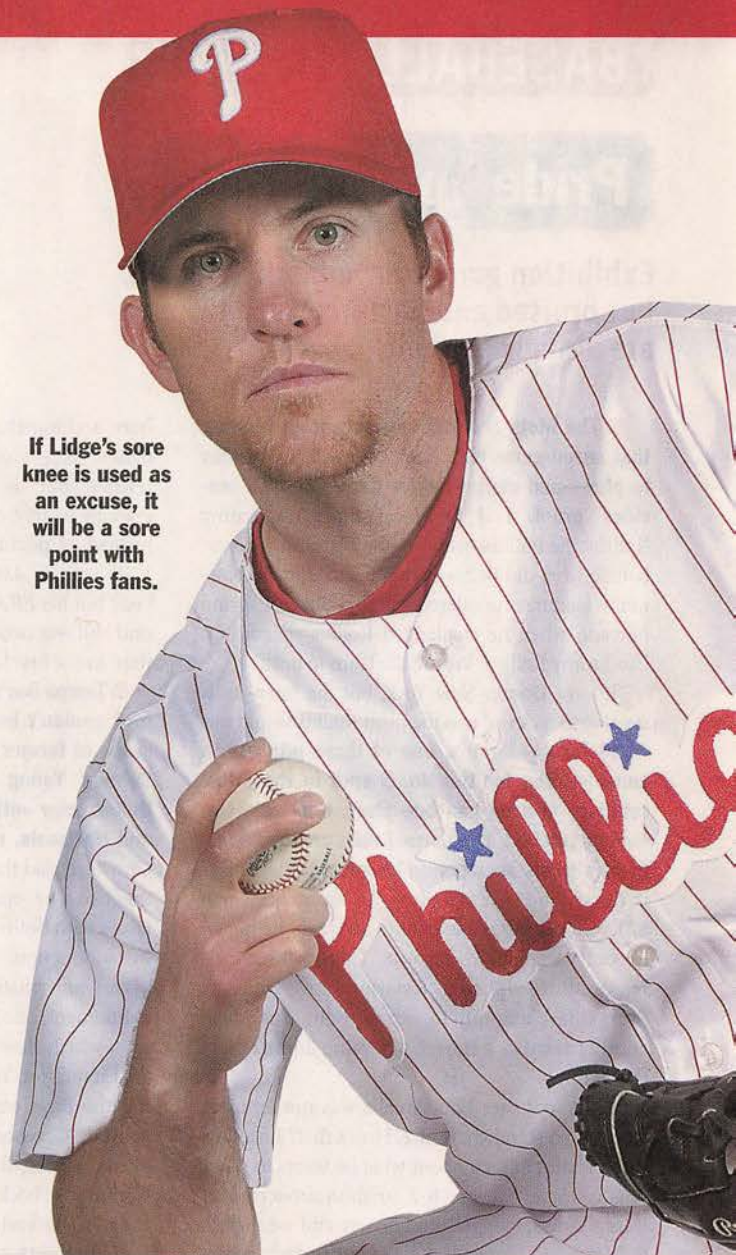
Lidge welcomed the trade. The demanding Philadelphia fans could be what he needs to regain his edge.

"I'm excited about this because it brings out another level of energy," Lidge says. "In my career, I've always fared best when I've been excited and there has been a lot of adrenaline. I think I'm going to be getting a lot of that this year."

But be warned: The locals will not accept a sore knee as an excuse.

—Gerry Fraley

If Lidge's sore knee is used as an excuse, it will be a sore point with Phillies fans.



**YOU HEARD IT HERE**

**'We are the team to beat this year. When I say that, I really mean it. Last year, I didn't say anything like that. We have everything we need. We have a new manager (Dusty Baker), and we have a new closer (Francisco Cordero). Those are the two main things we need for success. We got what we need.'**

—Reds second baseman Brandon Phillips, on Sporting News Radio's 2 Live Stews



## Hey, Lou, you might want to rethink this one

Cubs manager Lou Piniella is musing about finding the most effective batting order for newcomer Kosuke Fukudome and veteran holdovers Derrek Lee and Aramis Ramirez. Piniella's first inclination—to bat Fukudome third, followed by Lee and Ramirez—would not put Lee in his best spot, if history is any indication. (Ramirez has only slightly better numbers hitting fifth rather than fourth. For example, Ramirez's career OBP is .865 batting fifth and .841 batting fourth.)

Lee batting No. 3	G	HR	RBI	AVG	OPS
2007	144	21	74	.318	.907
Career	322	65	172	.313	.955
per 162 games	---	33	87	.313	.955
Lee in the cleanup spot	G	HR	RBI	AVG	OPS
2007	3	0	4	.200	.785
Career	134	20	79	.251	.807
per 162 games	---	24	96	.251	.807

Source: Stats LLC



## Pride & paychecks

**Exhibition games have barely started, but bruised and battered feelings are already evident.**

■ **The Mets are still smarting from blowing that seven-game N.L. East lead with 17 games to play—and center fielder Carlos Beltran provides proof.** Led by vocal shortstop Jimmy Rollins, the Phillies overtook the Mets last September. So what did Beltran do in Port St. Lucie? Normally taciturn, he offered the first dose of spring bravado when he challenged Rollins specifically. “To Jimmy Rollins: We are the team to beat.”

“It’s not Boston-New York, but the intensity is starting to pick up,” was the most Rollins would say.

■ **Jason Marquis, one of three pitchers in consideration for the No. 5 spot in the Cubs’ rotation, already has one start, one loss, two innings pitched, two earned runs and one argument with his manager on his record.** Marquis is in the second year of a three-year contract worth \$21 million. After his debut last week, he began his oral campaign in earnest. “I signed here for a reason. But I signed as a starter. I love Chicago, (but) I have a family to worry about. I can help another team as a starter. My value doesn’t lie in the bullpen.”

Cubs manager Lou Piniella was not amused: “He can go somewhere else. How’s that? It’s a little early to start talking about what he wants to do or not do.” Piniella turned to a question about reliever Kerry Wood, stopped midanswer and went back to Marquis: “That galls me. Go out and win a spot in the rotation. That’s the easy way out.”

Marquis has played his way out of two organizations (Braves and Cardinals) because he is stub-

born and impetuous. He has better than average power pitches but is not good enough to rely on throwing instead of pitching. He was 12-9 with a 4.60 ERA last year, but his ERA in the second half was two runs higher than in the first half.

■ **Tampa Bay’s Carl Crawford couldn’t help taking a swipe at former teammates Delmon Young and Elijah Dukes, now with the Twins and Nationals, respectively.** Crawford said the absence of the two—he cited maturity issues with both—is addition by subtraction. Young displayed an irritating sense of entitlement, one Rays official says, which flew in the face of everything Crawford stands for. Young fired back at Crawford, saying the Rays were a losing club well before he arrived. Crawford’s response: “We know we’ve been a losing franchise. He just wanted to say something back like he’s always running his mouth. That’s what he does.”

■ **Mariners center fielder Ichiro Suzuki, who had a contentious relationship with former manager Mike Hargrove, is being pushed by John McLaren.** Hargrove wanted Suzuki to drive more



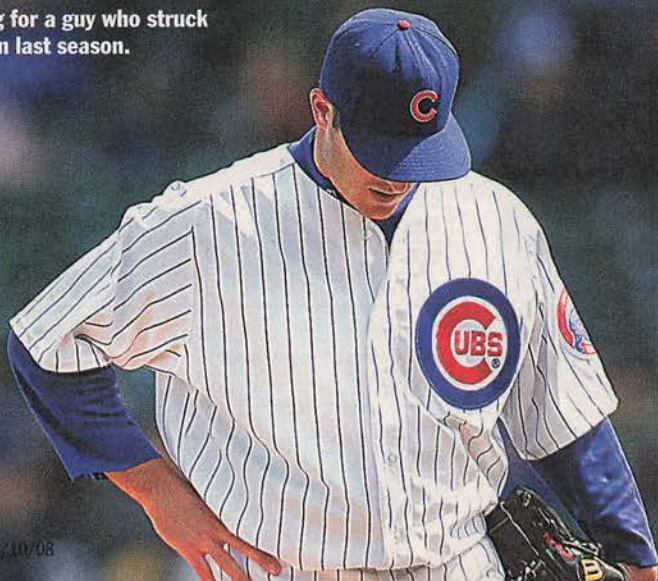
Crawford smoked a verbal line drive at two former teammates.

pitches and run more often. McLaren, who replaced Hargrove last July, also is asking more of Suzuki, challenging him to steal 80 bases. Suzuki’s career high is 56 (in 70 attempts) as a rookie in 2001. Another key point: McLaren wants Suzuki to demonstrate more leadership and impart his work ethic to some less ambitious teammates. Suzuki has shied away from the responsibility that goes with being the best player on a club.

■ **Yankees right fielder Bobby Abreu is entering his free-agent year and, big surprise, has reshaped his body.** Abreu came to camp badly out of shape last spring, missed time because of an oblique injury and hit .228 with 22 RBIs in his first 51 games before finishing strong.

■ **Nationals third baseman Ryan Zimmerman and G.M. Jim Bowden aren’t on the same page regarding Zimmerman’s salary.** Zimmerman has not signed for 2008 because he’s hoping to get a long-term contract. “We both know what we want,” Zimmerman says. “They know that I want to be here and I know that I want to be here, so there’s no reason to mess around. If it works out, it works out. If not, we’ll do another one-year deal.” Bowden’s take: “If Ryan is willing to sign a contract that is similar to what all the other good young players are signing for ... if he’s willing to do a ‘market signing,’ we are prepared to do that with him. We’re not going to set all new markets with him.” —John Rawlings

**Marquis is talking big for a guy who struck this pose far too often last season.**





# Coming of age —fast

Watch out for Kyle Busch. He's 22, talented, driven and out to prove that Hendrick's loss is a huge gain for Joe Gibbs Racing.

**S**ometimes, you forget how young Kyle Busch is. Three weeks into the NASCAR season, Busch has been so impressive in all three national series that people have been struggling to come up with comparisons.

Is he another Tim Richmond, a driver capable of handling a car so loose it looks out of control? Is he a Cale Yarborough, someone who hangs his car out for every bit of speed it might have on every lap? Is he the new Dale Earnhardt, a fearless competitor willing to try to squeeze his car into a hole nobody else even sees?

Busch has heard those comparisons.



With fearless Kyle Busch at the wheel, Toyota should soon break into the win column.

**FAST IS ALWAYS THE BEST STRATEGY.**



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"It's all flattering," says the driver of the Joe Gibbs Racing No. 18 Toyota.

But growing up, what driver did Busch admire the most?

"My favorite driver growing up was Jeff," Busch says, referring to Jeff Gordon. "When I started really paying attention and watching racing, he was the kind of guy who came on the scene and was winning eight, 10 or 14 races a year. I wanted to be successful like him."

Gordon is hardly an old-timer. But Busch is 22. He was born in 1985 in Las Vegas, where he enjoyed a homecoming last Sunday by starting from the pole and finishing 11th in the UAW-Dodge 400. Busch has emerged as one of the early season's top stories.

He led 86 of 200 laps in the Daytona 500 before lagging to fourth, then finished fourth at California. He ranks second in the Sprint Cup Series standings and first in the Craftsman Truck Series after a second-place finish and a win. Busch finished second to Cup teammate Tony Stewart in

the first two Nationwide Series races and still ranks second in those standings despite encountering problems at Las Vegas.

Busch showed he was human when he wrecked on his second Nationwide Series qualifying lap after running the third-fastest speed. It might be the first thing he has done wrong this season while making it look so easy to drive a car so hard. Then

## Wrecking in Nationwide qualifying might be the first thing Busch has done wrong this season while making it look so easy to drive a car so hard.

he finished 31st in the Nationwide race, exiting early when he crashed into the wall after his right front tire went flat. But overall, Busch has helped make the Toyota team look good.

"I think we are proving that the Gibbs equipment is just as good as the Hendrick stuff," said Busch, who moved from Hendrick Motorsports to Gibbs this year. "And we're able to capitalize on

what we've got over here with all of those guys and working with Denny (Hamlin) and Tony."

Hamlin won a Daytona 500 qualifying race, and Stewart had finishes of third and seventh in the first two Cup races before crashing at Las Vegas.

Busch said he prepped for last Sunday's race in true Las Vegas fashion. He spent a couple of days racing around on the sand dunes in the desert just out of town and sampled some of the area's top fare.

"You have to have some In-N-Out Burger," he says.

Busch says his sizzling start has been "cool," but he's trying

not to get too excited too fast.

"It has been great and all, but we're only two weeks in," he said before Sunday's race. "We need to be here with two weeks to go.

"But we hope we can keep it going and ride this wave for however long it lasts. I'm a pretty good surfer, so it shouldn't be too hard."

—David Poole

If fighting is a part of hockey, then why can't helmet-throwing be a part of NASCAR? Texas Motor Speedway president **Eddie Gossage** says he was glad to learn NASCAR has decided to loosen the reins on drivers this season, and as a result he has put up a "reward" for any helmet tossed during competition. Gossage: "I'm offering \$15,000 for any helmet thrown by a Cup series driver during a race between now and the April 6 Samsung 500, (at TMS). ... I've seen some helmets thrown during a race and never have they injured anyone or damaged another driver's car. We'll see what happens." The helmet must be thrown on the track during competition. ➤ Of **Tony Stewart's** 32 Cup victories, only four have come before June (zero in February, one each in March and April and two in May). One was in March 2002 at Atlanta, site of this week's Kobalt Tools 500. Stewart recorded the 33rd DNF of his career last Sunday when he smashed hard into the Turn 4 wall at Las Vegas on Lap 108 because his right front tire went flat. ➤ Here's something to watch: **Dale Earnhardt Jr.** has a legion of supporters, but there are 8,888 fans who will be rooting particularly hard for him to win the 2008 Cup championship. Playing on the new No. 88 car number Earnhardt adopted when he joined Hendrick Motorsports for the 2008 season, Las Vegas Motor Speedway sold



**The slow-starting Stewart hit the wall at Las Vegas and, true to form, is saving his best for later in the year.**

8,888 advance tickets that come with a special codicil for the spring Cup race in 2009. Those fans put down an \$88 deposit toward the purchase of their tickets. If Earnhardt wins the title, LVMS will refund the deposits and fans will watch the 2009 Cup race for free.

## speedreads

Kyle Busch is a most unlikely sort, but he's gaining an allegiance among NASCAR's fantasy enthusiasts. I'm officially on the bandwagon.

Who would have thought Kasey Kahne would be the only driver with three top 10s after three races? He had only eight all of last season.

The early favorite at Atlanta? Jimmie Johnson has won three of the past seven events there.

—Roger Kuznia





\* Winning the 2007 NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series Manufacturer's Championship evoked extreme levels of celebratory behavior. Capturing the title again in 2008 may lead to screaming, shouting, hugging, high-fiving, and big smoky burnouts. May also increase the amount of bikini-clad autograph seekers, the chances of a country song being written about you, diners naming a gigantic meat sandwich after you and a phone call from a leading marinade company wanting to put your face on a hot sauce. Good luck to our '08 teams: Billy Ballew Motorsports, Bill Davis Racing, Germain Racing, HT Motorsports, Red Horse Racing and Wyler Racing. To keep up with everything NASCAR, check out [toyota.com/pitpass](http://toyota.com/pitpass)

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Oh, if we only knew then what we know now: After the Big Two, last year's draft wasn't so loaded after all.

# Depth charge

By Stan McNeal

[smcneal@sportingnews.com](mailto:smcneal@sportingnews.com)

**A** prediction about the 2007 draft: It will be the first in 20 years to produce two rookies of the year. They will be Kevin Durant, this season's front-runner, and No. 1 pick Greg Oden, who will not play until next season.

Another prediction: That'll be the only highlight produced by the '07 draft, which was one of the most hyped in years.

"When you look at the list, there's not a lot of star power," says one of two league talent evaluators—one G.M., one assistant G.M.—who helped size up this season's rookie class for SPORTING NEWS.

There hasn't been much immediate impact, either. Besides Durant, Clippers forward Al Thornton and Grizzlies guard Juan Carlos Navarro are the only rookies averaging at least 10 points, the fewest since 2000-01. Only Hawks center Al Horford, who is Durant's sole competition for rookie of the year honors, is averaging at least 10 rebounds.

Besides Durant and Oden, don't expect anyone from this class to suit up for an All-Star team anytime soon. Horford is more lunch pail than All-Star. The Grizzlies' Mike Conley has game, but he plays in the land of great guards. Beyond those guys, who knows?

Our evaluators do know this: If the draft were done over today, it would look a lot like it did last June—with these notable exceptions.

## Would go higher

**Kevin Durant, SG, Sonics (second overall pick).** One evaluator would take him first now—not because of what he has done but because of Oden's season-ending surgery. "A big guy having



**If we could turn back time, Durant would soar higher—all the way to No. 1.**

## Hidden treasures

Three of this season's top rookies did not even come out of the 2007 draft. **Luis Scola, PF, Rockets (2002, 56th pick).** The Rockets lost the first game he started, then won their next 14. He shot 62.5 percent and averaged 11.6 points during the streak.

**Juan Carlos Navarro, SG, Grizzlies (2002, 39th pick).** Known as a long-range shooter with a quick release, Navarro also has proved to be adept at shooting floaters in the lane. He is the third-leading scorer among rookies at 11.1 points per game.

**Jamario Moon, SF, Raptors (undrafted).** After years of bouncing around the minors, he impressed the Raptors enough at a tryout camp last summer to earn a two-year contract. He's a long, athletic defender and has started at small forward all season.

microfracture? Oh yes, I'd be concerned," he says.

**Sean Williams, PF, Nets (17th).** He has lost his starting job since Nenad Krstic's return but already has shown he can block a lot of shots at this level. He would have gone higher if not for his off-court issues at Boston College.

**Rudy Fernandez, SG, Blazers (24th).** Without playing in the NBA, the Spaniard's stock has climbed. He's 6-6, Ray Allen-thin and likes to dunk. Is he ready to play meaningful minutes next season? "Oh yeah," says an evaluator who has scouted Fernandez this year.

**Carl Landry, PF, Rockets (31st).** The Rockets' hot run coincides with



rookie Luis Scola's joining the starting lineup about the same time Landry entered the rotation. "Landry's been tremendous," says ESPN analyst and former Rockets coach Jeff Van Gundy.

## Would go lower

**Yi Jianlian, Bucks (sixth).** As advertised, he's 6-11 with agility and a nice shot, but his dedication has been questioned. Evaluator: "I've got to wonder about someone who says they're playing this year to prepare for the Olympics."

**Corey Brewer, SF, Timberwolves (seventh).** He's not the first player coming off an NCAA championship run to go higher than he should have. Brewer has done little to distinguish himself at the NBA level. Evaluator: "I haven't seen anything I can grab on to about his game. Is he a scorer, a slasher, a defender? I'm not impressed."

**Julian Wright, SF, Hornets (13th).** Like Brewer, Wright has not shown any special skills at the pro level. Unlike Brewer, Wright has not been able to crack his team's rotation.

## Mixed reviews

**Brandon Wright, PF, Warriors (eighth).** Because of Don Nelson's aversion to rookies, Wright has played less than any of the lottery picks. Don't give up on him yet. In practice, he has shown himself to be just what the Warriors are lacking—an athletic big man. With Andris Biedrins out, Wright finally cracked the starting lineup last week.

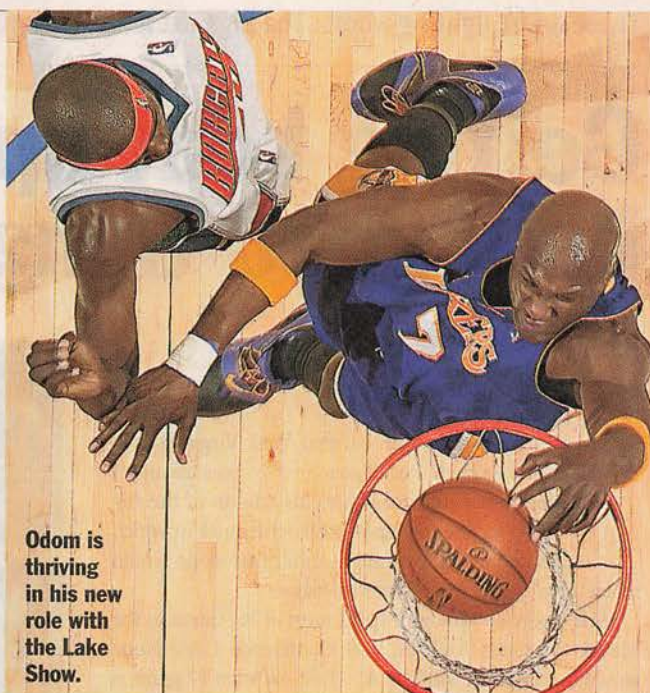
**Joakim Noah, F/C, Bulls (ninth).** He's another ex-Gator who, according to one of the evaluators, would go a few spots lower if the draft were held again. The other evaluator, however, is a Noah fan, likening him to Anderson Varejao—only with more length and talent. The pro-Noah guy: "If his mouth doesn't get in his way, he'll be fine. He loves to play, and he brings a lot of energy to the game." **SN**



Are the Lakers the best team in the league? Find out Friday when Stan McNeal unveils his weekly power poll at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).

Even though the Celtics like PG **Sam Cassell** and needed help at the point, they will regret not making a stronger run at **Damon Stoudamire**, who had Boston as his preferred destination before Spurs coach **Gregg Popovich** made his recruiting push. Cassell can bring an offense to a halt because of his tendency to dribble too much. Stoudamire can hit shots and lead fast breaks, and he does not care if he's not the one taking crunch-time shots. Cassell is at his best at the end of the game, but the Celtics already have three players who are even better. Cassell reportedly ended up forfeiting about half the remaining \$1.7 million left on his contract with the Clippers. It could have been worse if he did not have the same agent (**David Falk**) as PF **Elton Brand**, a potential free agent this summer whom the Clippers hope to keep. ➤ Lakers SF **Lamar Odom** is thriving in the

third-option role he has had since the team traded for PF **Pau Gasol**. Odom shot 61.2 percent in February after shooting in the 40s the first three months of the season and also had his best month for rebounds (11.6 per game) and assists (4.6). Lakers C **Andrew Bynum** (knee), meanwhile, has yet to start jogging. L.A. now is targeting early April for his return. ➤ Among the sub-.500 Eastern Conference playoff contenders, the Hawks, Nets, Bulls and Wizards all have more talent than the 76ers. But the Sixers, hanging on to the seventh spot when the week began, have one advantage, according to a scout:



Odom is thriving in his new role with the Lake Show.



"**Mo Cheeks**. He should get votes for coach of the year for what he's done. He has that team playing hard every night."

➤ Suns SF **Grant Hill** credits the training staff with helping him average 32.6 minutes this season, the most playing time he has had in

three years. According to Hill, the Suns' staff takes a different approach than most. "Let's say you have a bad hamstring," he says. "Instead of focusing just on the hamstring, they'll try to figure out what caused the hamstring to be injured."

➤ A silver lining for the team that finishes ninth in the West: It could win 50 games and still make the draft lottery. In the East, three playoff teams likely will finish below .500 and not be eligible for the lottery. Draft order of the playoff teams is determined by regular-season record, but the lottery includes teams that don't reach the playoffs regardless of record.

## speedreads

Congrats to LeBron James, 23, for becoming the youngest player to reach 10,000 points. Now all he needs to do is maintain his 27.2 career average for another 12 years to match Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's all-time scoring record.

So the Mavericks trade almost half their team for Jason Kidd, only to keep him on the bench for the last two possessions of a tight game against the Spurs. That is what you call overcoaching. Either that or dumb coaching.

Joe Dumars strikes again: Theo Ratliff will help the Pistons as much as any bought-out veteran will help his new team. The move was made just the way Dumars likes to do business—quietly and quickly.



These aren't fighting words: The Big East is the nation's toughest conference.

# Getting beat up could be a good thing

By Mike DeCourcy

[decourcy@sportingnews.com](mailto:decourcy@sportingnews.com)

If you were to be reminded that West Virginia's Bob Huggins has been a head coach for 26 seasons and if you then were informed that this edition of the Big East is by far the most powerful conference in which he has competed, you might think that alone would make this a special season for the league.

Well, not really. Huggins spent most of his career in the Metro, the Great Midwest and Conference USA. None would be confused with the A.L. East. So what Huggins is going through right now is new to him. This is OK because it's new for everybody.

The Big East is just a few days from the conclusion of its first season in which all teams played 18 league games. And the reward for reaching the end is, of course, more games against league opponents in next week's Big East Tournament.

Does playing a more challenging schedule really get a team ready for the NCAA Tournament? There's no compelling evidence to that end, but telling themselves it does helps Big East coaches cope.

"There's really good players in this league. But there's really good coaches," Huggins says. "You don't go in and say, 'I might be able to trick this guy.'"

"It's everything everybody says it is."

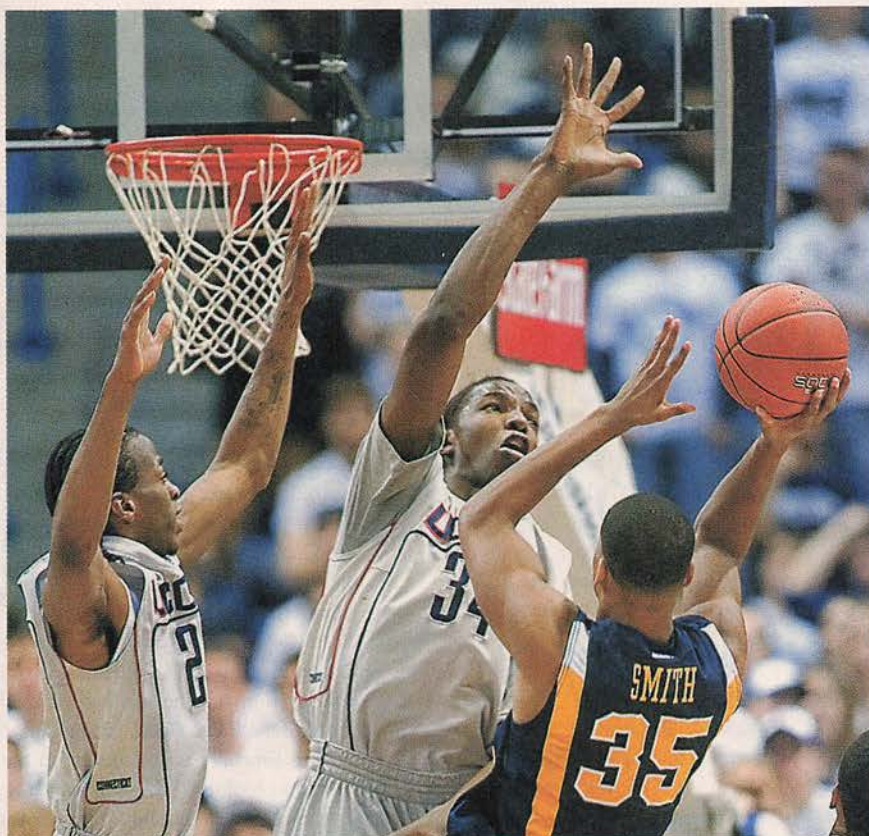
So what do they say?

"In this league, there is no relaxation," says Connecticut coach Jim Calhoun. "Every game, to some degree, becomes a war."

The Big East gave you no great reason to believe it would be this way with its performances in preconference games. Marquette earned a significant victory at Wisconsin. Pitt powered through Duke in overtime. But most of the better teams were too young (UConn), too injured (Louisville) or too careful in scheduling (Georgetown) to win the kinds of games that are impressive on final resumes.

Now UConn is older, Louisville is healthier, and Georgetown has no choice but to deal with opponents the Big East schedule mandates. Along with Notre Dame, they are the class of the league.

What separates the Big East from the other majors is that it has so many teams (16), so many capable teams (11, at least) and so many low-level teams that won't quit. It's a young league, with 16 of its top 20 scorers underclassmen, which may account for why no team has surrendered. Nearly one in four Big East games has been decided by a single possession or in overtime. That's twice as many as in the Big Ten.



UConn's Stanley Robinson (left) and Hasheem Thabeet give West Virginia's Wellington Smith some hands-in-your-face defense in another rugged Big East matchup.

**Coaches feared the 18-game league schedule might damage efforts to place as many teams as possible in the NCAA Tournament. In fact, it could help.**

Big East coaches weren't wild about the move to an 18-game league schedule, undertaken to create a stronger connection among the members and to provide television partners with a larger pool of attractive matchups. The coaches feared it might damage efforts to place as many teams as possible in the NCAA Tournament. In fact, it could help.

Associate commissioner Dan Gavitt points out that West Virginia and Syracuse missed the NCAAs last season despite reaching the 20-win mark. "They had a bunch of conference wins, but they hadn't had enough opportunities to beat the top teams in the league," he says. "I think this gives all of our teams a more fair chance to get there."

There is no doubt playing so many tough conference games depresses everyone's poll rankings. The Big East had no top 10 teams in last week's AP poll. UConn was three spots behind Indiana, despite beating the Hoosiers on their



home court in late January. Marquette was 11 spots behind Wisconsin despite that victory in Madison. It has not damaged the Big East in the RPI standings, though. There are six Big East teams in the top 25 and seven in the top 50.

Of the BCS conferences, half play 18-game league schedules (including the Big Ten, which also made the move this season, and the Pac-10) and half play 16 games. The Big East wouldn't mind if they all were doing the same thing it is. But the coaches and players are doing a lousy job of advertising its appeal.

"It's been tough," says West Virginia point guard Darris Nichols.

"This is a brutal league," says Georgetown coach John Thompson.

The conference includes a slogan—"Every game counts"—in the ads it runs for games featured on the Big East Network. It ought to be "Every game hurts." But as coaches love to say, "No pain, no gain." **SN**

## ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Mike DeCourcy will be among the Cameron Crazies for Duke vs. Carolina. Find out whether he thinks the winner gets a No. 1 seed at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).

## speedreads

Cornell became the first team to clinch an NCAA Tournament berth. It's an old story—the Ivy League's regular-season champ almost always clinches first because there is no conference tournament. But Cornell is as fresh as an organic apple. The Big Red are the first team other than Penn or Princeton to represent the Ivy since 1988.

Word from *The New York Times* that Harvard is lowering academic standards and Tommy Amaker and his staff are pushing the boundaries of recruiting ethics to build a stronger roster begs the question: Who's going to coach all that talent?

A greeting card writer might come up with something clever. I'll just say: Get well soon, coach Wooden.

Georgetown's victory at Marquette was the Hoyas' third Big East win in which they were aided by a controversial call, including escapes against West Virginia and Villanova. It's better to be lucky than good, but it's best to be both.

Life for the SEC East's top teams has been rough lately. Tennessee's time as No. 1 in the country was still best measured in hours when the Vols lost at Vanderbilt. Then the Commodores celebrated their impressive accomplishment by losing at Arkansas in their next

game. Kentucky's improbable turnaround and rush toward an NCAA Tournament berth took a devastating blow when star freshman PF **Patrick Patterson** was sidelined for the rest of the season with a stress fracture in his left ankle. And Florida's at-large hopes were hurt with a home loss to Mississippi State, the top team in the SEC West. **Bob Knight** says he'll be a "consultant"—not a true media member—when he lends his voice to ESPN as an analyst during the postseason. It will be interesting to

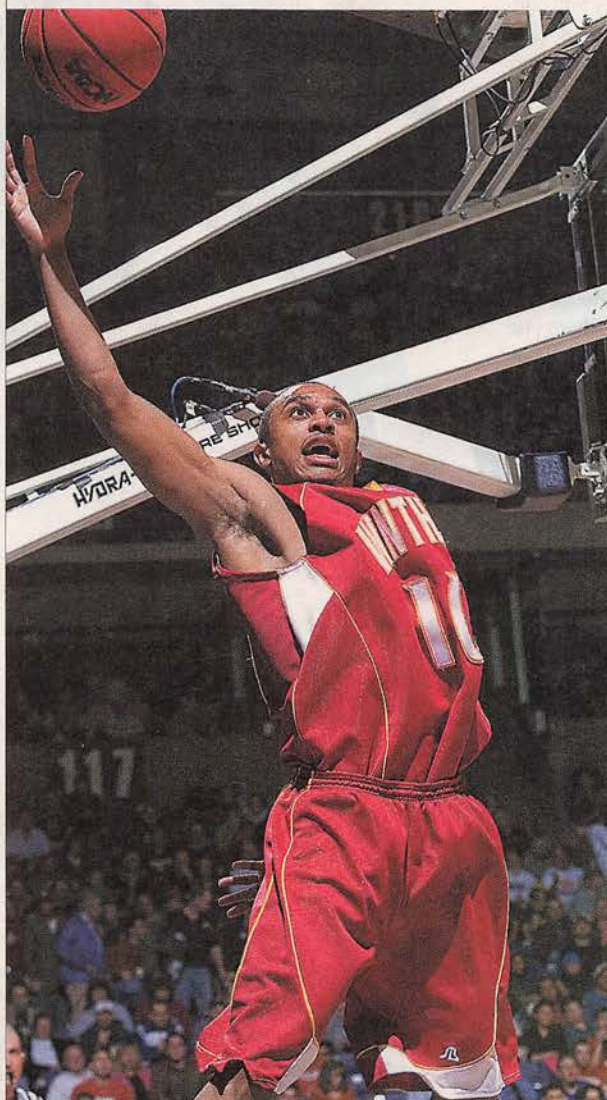
## INSIDE DISH

see how frank he is with his opinions. **➤** Speaking of Knight, Duke coach **Mike Krzyzewski** made special mention of his coaching mentor on the day he won his 800th game, a comeback victory against N.C. State. It's only a matter of time before Krzyzewski

joins Knight in the 900-win club. **➤** The nation's top teams got a full dose of tournament intensity last weekend. Texas lost, and Duke, North Carolina, Georgetown, Memphis and Tennessee all were pushed to the edge. Their ability to find ways to win will be key when it's time to win or go home in the NCAA Tournament. **➤** Conference tournaments start this week, and there are story lines worth watching. In the Big South, Winthrop has made the Big Dance three years in a row and seven times in the past 10

years. The Eagles entered the week tied with UNC Asheville atop the conference, but they were swept by the Bulldogs in the regular season. Winthrop coach **Randy Peele** needs more consistent contributions from Gs **Michael Jenkins** and **Chris Gaynor** and F **Taj McCullough** to get past Asheville in the conference tournament. **➤** One day after St. John's announced coach **Norm Roberts** will be back next season—speculation about his potential departure had grown as the Red Storm slid toward the bottom of the Big East—the team snapped a five-game losing streak with a home victory against Seton Hall. Roberts is in the fourth season of a five-year contract he signed to help St. John's recover from penalties imposed on the program for assorted NCAA violations. Athletic director **Chris Monasch** said an extension will be discussed after this season. —*Ryan Fagan*

**Winthrop won't make its fourth straight NCAA trip unless Gaynor and his teammates find consistency in the Big South tourney.**





Now that the trade winds have stopped blowing, the Penguins, Stars and Sharks appear to be better positioned for a shot at the Stanley Cup.

## Beefing up for the stretch run

By Chuck Gormley

**G**otta hand it to those NHL general managers. Every year they say they will control their wheel-and-deal urges, and every year they burn up the phone lines with a flurry of deadline trades.

This time, there were 25 involving 45 players and 23 draft picks over a head-spinning span of six hours on the final day. How busy was it? Only four teams—the Flyers, Bruins, Oilers and Flames—did not make a move on D-day. So who were the big winners?

**Pittsburgh acquired RW Marian Hossa and LW Pascal Dupuis from the Thrashers for RW Colby Armstrong, C Erik Christensen, C Angelo Esposito and a 2008 first-round pick.**

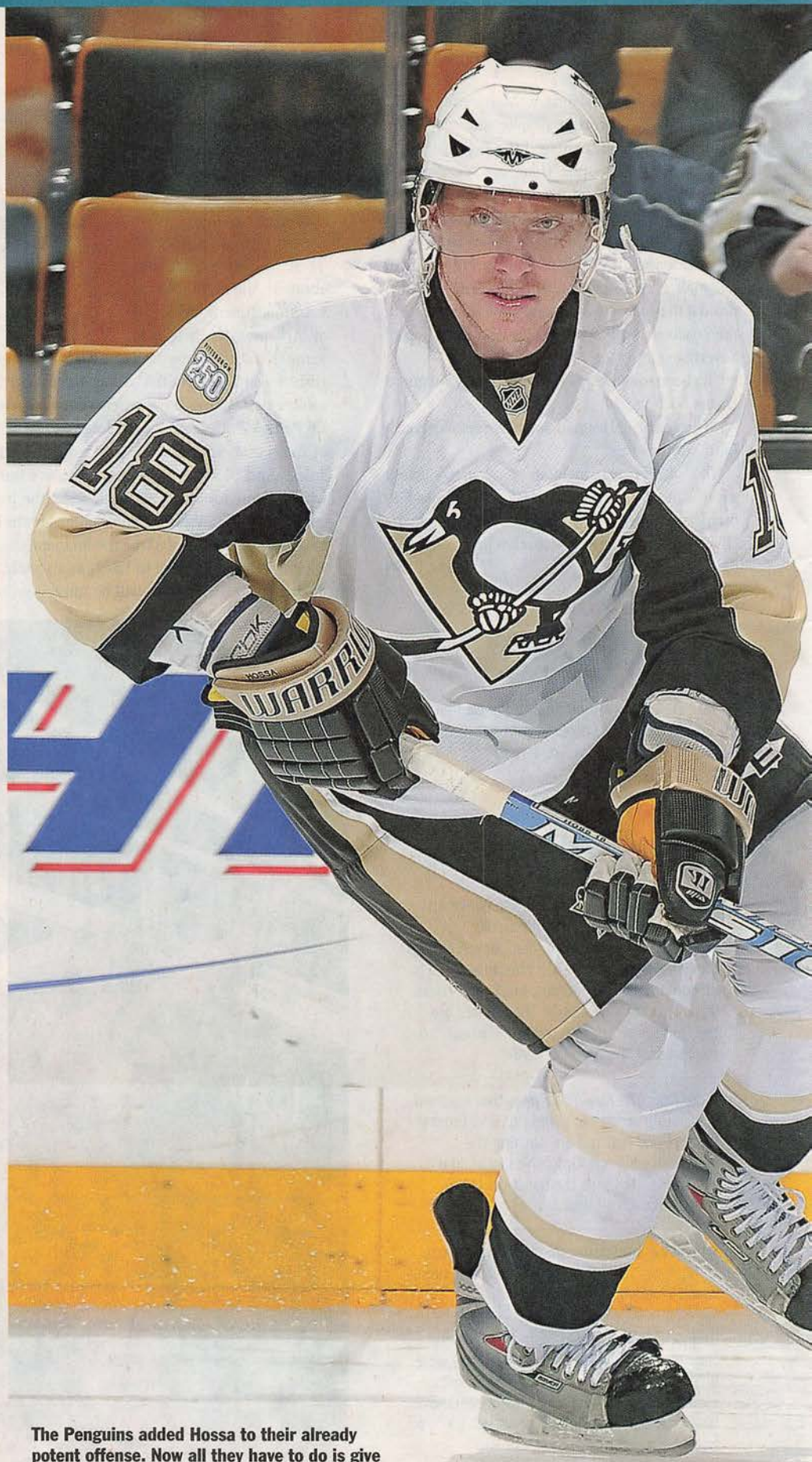
Penguins general manager Ray Shero rolled the dice. Hossa, one of the NHL's brightest young stars, joined an incredible offensive cast that includes Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Ryan Malone and Petr Sykora.

But the Pens traded away one of Crosby's closest friends (Armstrong), and with Hossa expected to demand \$10 million per season as a free agent, they run the risk of losing a lot more than they gained.

"There's risk in anything you do," Shero says. "There's risk in standing pat at the deadline. There's risk in acquiring players of this magnitude—especially Hossa."

The Hossa watch got off to a bad start when he sprained a knee in his first game, an injury that should only cost him a week. But if he comes back and helps the Pens get deep in the playoffs and then re-signs over the summer, Shero will have pulled off the steal of the season. If not, and 2007 first-round pick Esposito blossoms into a star in Atlanta, he will have made a huge mistake.

"Pittsburgh kind of snuck in the back door with that one," says Flyers general manager Paul



The Penguins added Hossa to their already potent offense. Now all they have to do is give him \$10 million or so a year to stick around.



Holmgren, who admits to inquiring about Hossa. "I don't think anyone even thought they were an option."

**Winner:** The Penguins, who also picked up hard-hitting defenseman Hal Gill from the Maple Leafs, became the team to beat in the East.

**Dallas acquired C Brad Richards and G Johan Holmqvist from the Lightning for G Mike Smith, LW Jussi Jokinen, C Jeff Halpern and a 2009 fourth-round pick.**

In what amounted to a salary dump for the Lightning, the Stars got one of the league's rising offensive players. Richards was available because he has three years and \$23.4 million remaining on his contract. At 27, he's in the prime of his career, though he has never cracked 30 goals and has surpassed 80 points just once.

The key for the Lightning was Smith, an impressive second-year goalie. The Lightning also got Jokinen, who is 17-for-29 in career shootout attempts.

**Winner:** With Mike Ribeiro, Mike Modano and Richards down the middle, the Stars stepped up to the level of the Red Wings and Ducks.

**San Jose acquired D Brian Campbell and a 2008 seventh-round pick from the Sabres for RW Steve Bernier and a 2008 first-round pick.**

The Sharks gave up a tough, physical forward in Bernier and had to include a first-round pick to get the deal done, but they got the best defenseman on the market. Campbell could stabilize the Sharks' blue line for years—if they can sign him.

**Winner:** The Sharks got their man, while the Sabres lost another core player.

**One day after signing free-agent C Peter Forsberg, Colorado acquired D Ruslan Salei from the Panthers and D Adam Foote from the Blue Jackets for D Karlis Skrastins and 2008 first-, third- and fourth-round picks.**

Two days before the deadline, the Avalanche ranked 10th in the rugged Western Conference. But by adding Forsberg and Foote to a suddenly healthy lineup that includes Joe Sakic, Ryan Smyth and Paul Stastny, the Avs became a legitimate threat.

**Winner:** If Forsberg's right foot is stable, he'll be a difference-maker for the Avs.

**Washington acquired G Cristobal Huet from the Canadiens for a 2009 second-round pick and C Sergei Fedorov from the Blue Jackets for D Theo Ruth.**

By trading their starting goaltender, the Canadiens are putting incredible pressure on 20-year-old rookie Carey Price. Huet may be a fading star, but he gives the Capitals insurance for Olaf Kolzig and a goalie capable of carrying a team. Fedorov might show his old form if he plays on a line with Alexander Ovechkin.

**Winner:** The Capitals got a potential No. 1 goalie; the Canadiens, who were in hot pursuit of Hossa, came out empty-handed.

SN

## INSIDE DISH

Shot blocking is one of the game's most overlooked skills—and maybe its ultimate test of intestinal fortitude.

For years, Blues D **Jay McKee** had been considered the most proficient at putting his body in harm's way. But one league personnel director believes there is a new kid on the block. "I'd definitely say it's **Mike Komisarek**," he says, referring to the Canadiens' 26-year-old defenseman. "He is just so good at it. His size and his range really help him block shots." Komisarek is listed at 6-4, 242, and it probably doesn't hurt that his coach, **Guy Carbonneau**, is considered one of the best shot-blocking forwards in the history of the game. ➤ The return of veteran LW **Brendan Shanahan** from a knee injury has boosted the Rangers' hopes for a playoff berth. Shanahan has four goals and three assists since returning to the lineup after missing five games, and the Rangers are 5-0-1 over that span. ➤ For under-the-radar performances, how about Blues F **Brad Boyes**? Boyes, 25, who was acquired from the Bruins for D **Dennis Wideman** at last year's trading deadline, ranks among the league's top 10 goal scorers this season with 32. "He's more featured this year, and he's

starting to figure it out," says a league personnel director. "It has always taken him some time at every

level: juniors, minors and then the NHL. He's got a shot at 50 goals if he really gets hot down the stretch." ➤ Warning to all NHL teams: Don't get into a shootout with the .500 Oilers. Edmonton has posted a league-record 13 shootout victories (against three losses) this season, primarily because of the one-on-one goaltending of **Mathieu Garon**. Only two opponents have scored on Garon in his nine shootouts, and his .931 shootout save percentage has resulted in a 9-0 record. Garon has posted a 22-16 record overall for a team that is 30-30-5 and out of playoff contention. ➤ If you're scratching your head over the sudden vulnerability of the Red Wings, just look at the players who have been logging minutes on defense: **Andreas Lilja**, **Brett Lebda**, **Derek Meech**, **Kyle Quincey**, **Jonathan Ericsson** and **Garrett Stafford**. **Chris Chelios** (leg) recently joined a sick bay that includes fellow Ds **Nicklas Lidstrom** (knee), **Brian Rafalski** (groin) and **Niklas Kronwall** (clavicle). All four should be healthy by playoff time. *Contributing: Victor Chi, Ron Smith*



Boyes (right) has figured it out, and that's plenty of reason to smile.



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Gentlemen, start your Zambonis. The stretch run for the Presidents' Trophy, league scoring honors and playoff positions is about to begin. Keep up with everything at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).



Want the No. 1 draft pick? Anyone? Anyone? Bueller?

# A lesser reward for the rotten

By Clifton Brown

[cliftonbrown@sportingnews.com](mailto:cliftonbrown@sportingnews.com)

**T**here was a time when the first overall pick in the NFL draft was coveted. Now, it's almost as much burden as benefit.

Is that a bad thing? I don't think so. Now teams have even more motivation to avoid being lousy.

The Dolphins have this year's No. 1 pick, and it will be nearly impossible for them to trade it. Moving up that high in the draft is simply not worth the money anymore.

This year's No. 1 pick is expected to command a contract worth at least \$30 million in guaranteed money. If Peyton Manning were in this year's draft, trading for the No. 1 pick would be tempting. But with no surefire franchise quarterback on the board, nobody is salivating for the privilege of shelling out \$30 million guaranteed.

Trying to persuade someone to trade for the No. 1 pick has become like trying to persuade a bald man to get a haircut. No team has traded into the top 10 picks in the past two drafts, and the concept of the draft has been hurt by enormous rookie contracts.

"Trades are a unique thing in the first round anymore because of the cost of the top 10 picks financially," says Colts president Bill Polian. "To take on that cost, and then give up something to do it, is almost counterintuitive. And that's clearly not what the draft was designed to be. The draft was designed to either allow the weakest teams based on record to choose the best players, or if they choose not to take a particular player, to gather a bunch of picks to further accelerate their growth and competitiveness. That's been skewed completely by the cost of the top 15 picks.

"If I'm after the first pick and I have to pay \$30 million for it, how much do I want to give up in addition to that? And if you fail with that pick, your franchise is saddled with an albatross that you can't get rid of for who knows how long."

I agree with Polian that huge contracts have made trading up less appealing. But I'm glad that having the No. 1 pick is not the bargaining chip it once was. Having the No. 1 pick means you had the worst record in the NFL. You should be rewarded only so much for finishing 1-15.

The NFL is not like the NBA, where an extraordinary No. 1 pick such as LeBron James makes up one-fifth of your starting lineup. There are so many more holes to fill in the NFL than a single



**If a team with the No. 1 pick winds up with a player of McFadden's caliber, it can't complain about that. But it sure wouldn't mind having the options teams in its spot once had.**

player can't have that kind of impact. And if you pick someone unworthy of being No. 1, as the Texans did in 2002 (David Carr) and the Browns did in 2000 (Courtney Brown), it sets back your franchise for years.

The Dolphins can't afford that kind of mistake. They will have a host of good players to choose from at No. 1—defensive end Chris Long, offensive tackle Jake Long, defensive tackle Glenn Dorsey, quarterback Matt Ryan, running back Darren McFadden, defensive end Vernon Ghol-

ston or defensive tackle Sedrick Ellis. Their decision will garner plenty of attention, but how well the Dolphins pick in Rounds 2 through 7 will also play a crucial role in determining how quickly they rebuild. Look at what the Giants did last year, getting contributions from almost all of their 2007 draft choices and building depth that helped them win a Super Bowl. Teams that consistently draft well do not worry as much about whether they pick No. 1, No. 10 or No. 20.

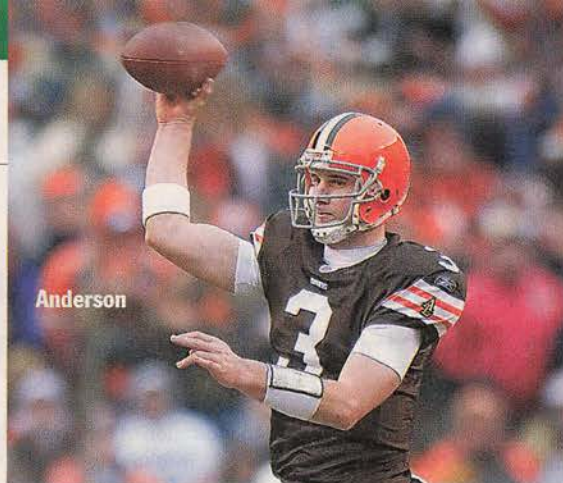
"Scouts, that's really where we make our money,





## INSIDE DISH

LB **Jonathan Vilma** should be happier in New Orleans if he can stay healthy. The Jets traded Vilma to the Saints largely because he is a line-backer who prefers the 4-3 and never performed as well in **Eric Mangini's** 3-4 system. Vilma missed most of last season with a knee injury, but the Saints desperately need to upgrade their defense. ➤ **Derek Anderson's** decision to re-sign with the Browns does not end the team's quarterback controversy. The Browns are comfortable starting Anderson next season, but **Brady Quinn** is still battling to be the starting QB of the future. Anderson likes playing for the Browns, but he may regret not testing the free-agent market. Plenty of teams need quarterbacks, and Anderson might have fetched a lucrative offer. Staying with the Browns enabled Anderson to pocket a reported \$14 million guaranteed, but he will still have to deal with the threat of Quinn eventually taking his job. ➤ Expect the Jaguars to offer coach **Jack Del Rio** a contract extension before next season. Del Rio's contract expires after the 2008 season, and having a lame-duck coach is a distraction that owner **Wayne Weaver** should want to avoid. Del Rio could find employment elsewhere, but he wants to remain in Jacksonville. That makes it likely a new deal will get done. ➤ The Bills want a wide receiver with size, and there should be plenty available when they draft at No. 11. Among those targeted by the Bills are Oklahoma's **Malcolm Kelly**, Florida's **Andre Caldwell**, LSU's **Early Doucet** and perhaps Michigan



Anderson

State's **Devin Thomas**, whose stock rose at the Combine. A dependable receiver playing opposite **Lee Evans** would make life easier for second-year QB **Trent Edwards**. ➤ Colts owner **Jim Irsay's** passion for sports extends beyond football. An avid golfer, Irsay is sponsoring LPGA golfer **Becky Lucidi** on tour this year, taking care of Lucidi's meals and travel expenses. Irsay met Lucidi through a mutual friend and decided to support her career. For Irsay, sponsoring Lucidi is far cheaper than paying **Peyton Manning's** salary. ➤ Re-signing LT **Flozell Adams** was huge for the Cowboys. They were fortunate Adams wanted to play with a contender and wasn't eager to test the free-agent market. He has missed only 10 games because of injury in 10 seasons, and he has played in four of the last five Pro Bowls. Adams, 32, should continue to protect **Tony Romo's** blind side effectively for a few more seasons. ➤ Don't be surprised if the Buccaneers grab a running back with the 20th pick of the draft. **Cadillac Williams** is not expected back until at least November, and there is no guarantee that he will ever be the same runner after his serious knee injury. **Earnest Graham** played well after Williams went down, and the Buccaneers re-signed **Michael Bennett** for insurance. However, this year's draft running back pool is very deep, and one of those options could be hard to resist.

## speedreads

on the second day of the draft," says Giants general manager Jerry Reese. "You can really find some steals. We pride ourselves on trying to do that."

Since 2000, seven different teams have had the No. 1 pick. None of those teams has won a Super Bowl during that period, and only one of them, the Chargers, made the playoffs last season.

Having the No. 1 pick is more expensive than ever, and it doesn't always pay great dividends. The Dolphins are in position to get an excellent player at No. 1. But it should tell you something that nobody is eager to trade places with them. **SN**

Derek Anderson is staying with the Browns, which means Brady Quinn is likely staying on the bench. Quinn should still be kicking himself for holding out last year.

Things worked out well for both Lance Briggs and the Bears. Briggs got his money—and the Bears kept one of the game's best linebackers.

Signing Michael Turner was a good move by the Falcons, who are determined to establish the run. It also means they will not draft Darren McFadden.

Ken Whisenhunt made the right move assuring Matt Leinart he will start next season. Leinart, not Kurt Warner, is the quarterback who holds the key to the Cardinals' future.



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

For more on winners and losers in free agency, read Clifton Brown's column at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).



## INSIDE THE AFC

## The Jets don't lag behind in their quest to improve

The flurry of activity by the Jets is an indication of their belief they can quickly turn around a team that slumped to 4-12 in 2007. Even at 31, LG Alan Faneca is still one of the league's best offensive linemen—and he's a plus in the locker room. He'll have a key role in mentoring two young talents—LT D'Brickashaw Ferguson and C Nick Mangold. NT Kris Jenkins should greatly improve the run defense, which has struggled without a force in the middle.

**BALTIMORE** Look for the middle of the offensive line to be retooled. When everything is sorted out, LG Jason Brown figures to be a good fit at center, with RG Ben Grubbs moving to the left side and RT Marshal Yanda switching to right guard.

**BUFFALO** Signing OLB Kawika Mitchell gives the team much-needed size (6-1, 253) and strength at the second level. His ability as an outside blitzer also intrigues the Bills.

**CINCINNATI** Second-year FS Marvin White could replace Madieu Williams, who signed with the Vikings. White is an aggressive hitter, with good speed and range. He needs to improve his recognition skills and take better angles to the ball.

**CLEVELAND** Cornerback could be the weakness that trips up the club. The team is banking on Eric Wright, a second-round pick last year, to emerge as a shutdown corner and hopes fifth-rounder Brandon McDonald will come up big.

**DENVER** Signing WR Keary Colbert is at least a start in filling the gap at No. 2 receiver. Colbert has decent speed but didn't catch a TD pass the past two years. Cal WR DeSean Jackson could be a target in the draft.

**HOUSTON** Free-agent pickup Jacques Reeves has the speed and experience to push for a starting corner job opposite Fred Bennett. The Texans are expected to be without CB Dunta Robinson (knee) for at least half the season.

**INDIANAPOLIS** There's a downside to management's policy of reinvesting so heavily in its star players: the lack of experienced depth. As long as the big names stay on the field, no problem. But last year, WR Marvin Harrison and RE Dwight Freeney missed extensive time.

**JACKSONVILLE** Stockpiling picks is a nice luxury, but trading away DT Marcus Stroud leaves

a gaping void. Paired with John Henderson, Stroud helped make the defense almost impenetrable against the run. The most likely internal candidate to fill Stroud's spot is veteran Rob Meier, but the team could turn elsewhere.

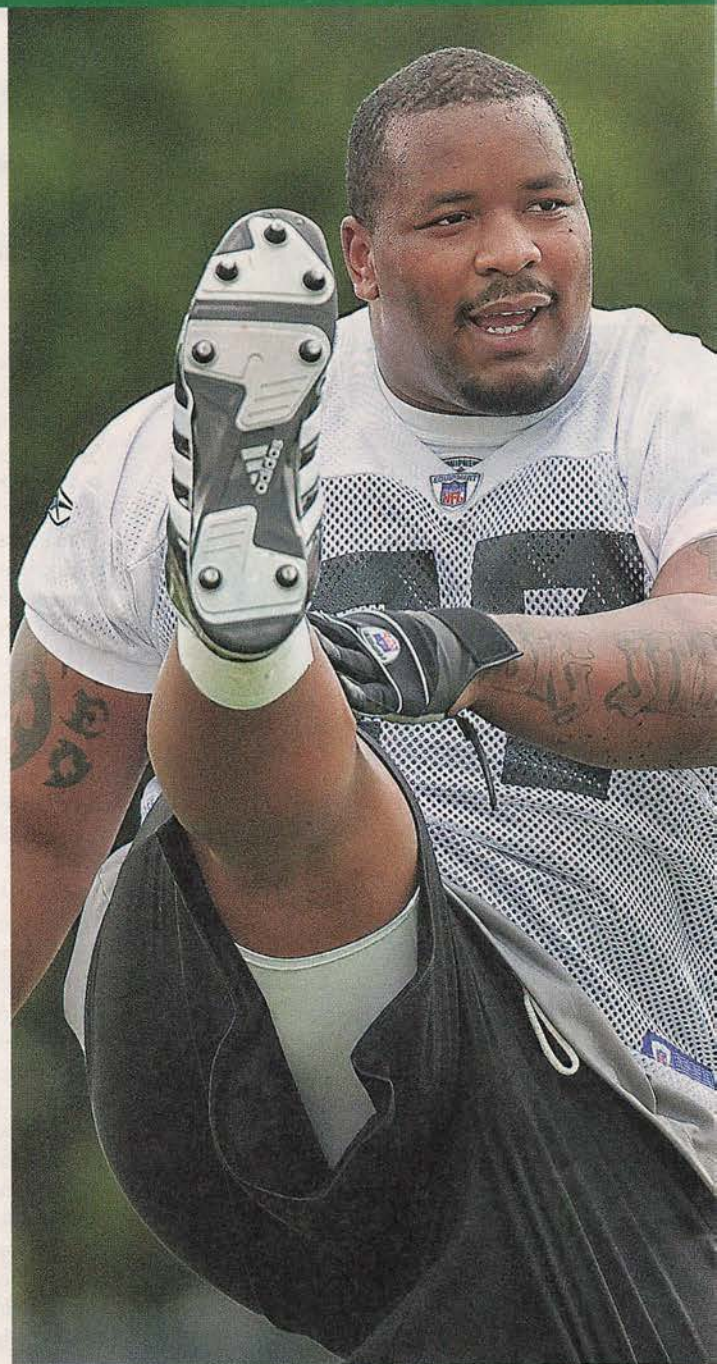
**KANSAS CITY** The addition of free-agent OLB Demorrio Williams will allow Donnie Edwards to move to the middle. Edwards played well last season but likely will be a better fit in the middle in the cover 2. Williams is a good athlete who runs well.

**MIAMI** In addition to trading for veteran NT Jason Ferguson, the Dolphins added seven free agents. OLB Reggie Torbor and Ernest Wilford—a tall, physical player who likely will be the No. 2 wideout—could make an impact. The team also signed QB Josh McCown to compete against John Beck.

**NEW ENGLAND** Now that CB Asante Samuel is gone, there's considerable focus on Ellis Hobbs. Some believe he'd be an excellent slot corner; others think that if fully healthy, he could be a No. 1. One thing is certain: The Pats will be leaning on him.

**OAKLAND** The Raiders made a splash by resigning DT Tommy Kelly and adding SS Gibril Wilson. Kelly was showing signs of reaching his vast potential last season before injuring his knee.

**CORRESPONDENTS:** Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.



The Jets may get a leg up when it comes to run defense, thanks to the addition of Jenkins, who will play nose tackle in the team's 3-4.

Wilson makes a lot of tackles and is a big-play defender.

**PITTSBURGH** The team will miss LG Alan Faneca, but not to the degree most people think. Even with Faneca, the line was the team's most underachieving unit the past two seasons. A case in point: QB Ben Roethlisberger was sacked a combined 93 times in 2006 and '07.



## The Browns get dressed up for a showy run in '08

Don't let Phil Savage's baby face fool you.

The Cleveland G.M.'s annual talent roundup tends to be as aggressive as his surname. This March, he came in like a lion, serving notice the Browns intend to leap from playoff bystander to a team capable of making a deep postseason run.

First, Savage cleared the quarterback clouds by signing Derek Anderson through 2010. Then, he used trades and free agency to repair a broken defense and enhance an emerging offense, which recently got a boost with the re-signing of running back Jamal Lewis.

The team signed wideout Donte' Stallworth away from the Patriots, giving an offense that was the NFL's most improved in 2007 a springboard for another jump. With his big-play ability, Stallworth, 27, should be one of the better No. 2s and prevent defenses from loading up coverage on Braylon Edwards.

Defense is where the Browns needed major repairs. Trade acquisitions Shaun Rogers (Lions) and Corey Williams (Packers) have Cleveland convinced its three-man front will move from weakness to strength. A ripple effect figures to produce better play from a linebacking unit featuring talented third-year players Kamerion Wimbley and D'Qwell Jackson.

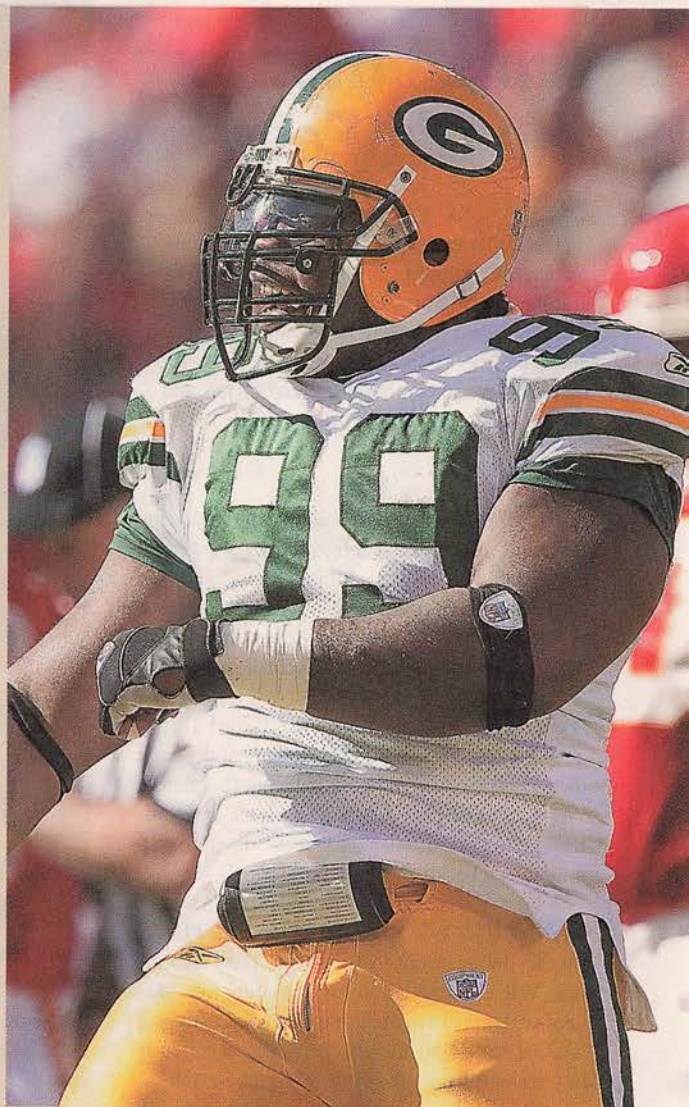
Teams won't be able to chip Wimbley as much on his outside rushes. And there will be less pressure on the secondary. With Rogers on the nose or end and Williams at end, the team's pass rush—tepid in '07—could be smoking.

The Browns think a change of scenery and coach Romeo Crennel's influence will return Rogers to his Pro Bowl form. Williams figures to bring a serious inside pass rush but must improve against the run—an area that has plagued the team.

Anderson faded as 2007 wore on, yet he has a rocket arm and was 10-5 as a starter. The team believes he has upside that will be tapped as Stallworth makes his mark.

"Boy, it's a great day, isn't it?" Crennel said of Savage's dealing. Cleveland won't be hosting a draft party, though. It swapped picks in each of the first three rounds for Williams, Rogers and quarterback Brady Quinn.

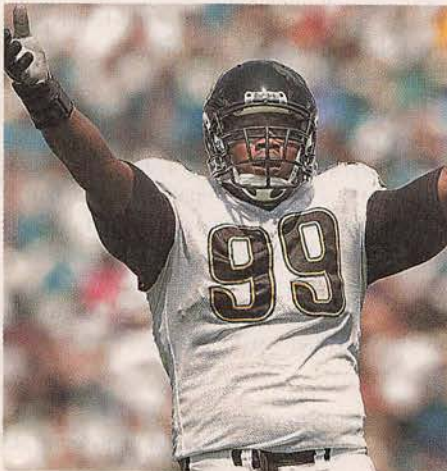
Giving up all those picks leaves the Browns a bit naked in April, but Savage's idea was dressing the team for success in January. —Steve Doerschuk



Fresh from the frozen tundra, Williams will help heat up the Browns' pass rush—but needs to improve against the run.

**SAN DIEGO** The team solidified its depth, signing ILB Derek Smith and re-signing QB Billy Volek. Smith will play behind Stephen Cooper and provide crucial experience on the field and off. Retaining Volek has the Chargers feeling better about their Super Bowl chances.

**TENNESSEE** Former Falcon Alge Crumpler decided to sign with the Titans, in part, because QB Vince Young reminded him of Michael Vick. The team will expect Crumpler, 30, to be Young's safety valve and help a red zone offense that ranked last in the NFL in 2007.



## The force is now with the Bills

For years, the Bills' run defense has been mediocre because their line has been manhandled. That should change with the addition of three-time Pro Bowl DT **Marcus Stroud**, one of the NFL's best at plugging gaps and collapsing the pocket. His ability to draw double-teams gives the rest of the line a chance to win one-on-one matchups and allows linebackers to move freely to the ballcarrier. Stroud missed seven games in '07 because of an ankle injury and a suspension for violating the league's steroids and related substances policy. The Bills think all that is behind him—and that they now have their dominant inside force.



## INSIDE THE NFC

# A big hitter for the Big Easy

The Saints aggressively addressed their woes on defense by trading for MLB Jonathan Vilma and signing CB Randall Gay and DE Bobby McCray. Vilma (6-1, 230) is an athletic playmaker and explosive tackler who covers a lot of ground quickly. Gay will compete for a starting job, and McCray is a needed pass-rush specialist.

**ARIZONA** The team has a couple of options for replacing Terrence Holt at free safety. Aaron Francisco is an athletic, fierce hitter who is one of the league's best special teams players, but he needs to be more vocal. Antrel Rolle, a former cornerback, has good speed and breaks on the ball well.

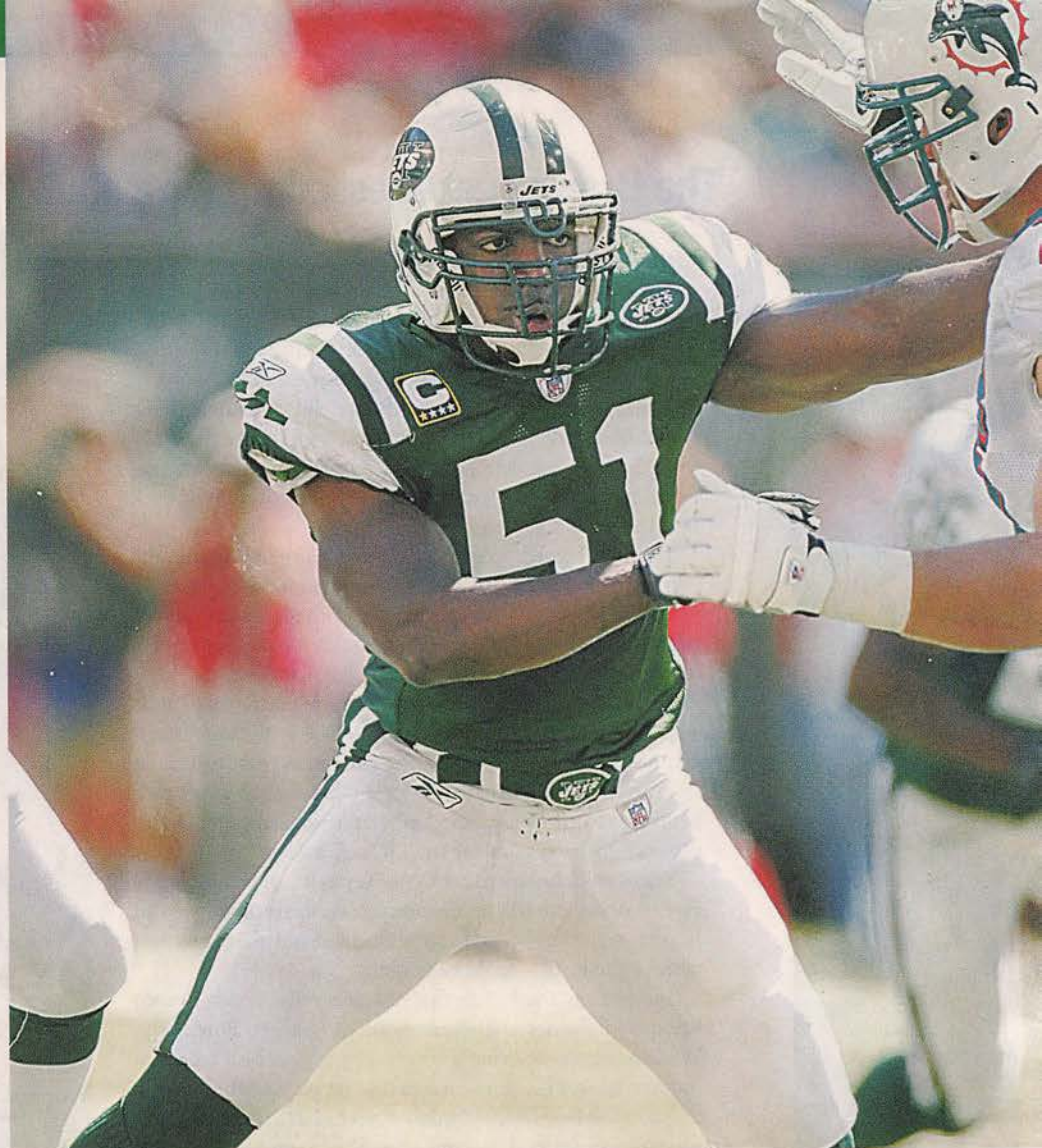
**ATLANTA** Free-agent pickup Michael Turner gives the Falcons the hard-charging running back they need to lead their smash-mouth offense. Warrick Dunn's days in Atlanta likely are done, but Jerious Norwood will continue to develop as a third-down back.

**CAROLINA** WR Muhsin Muhammad, 34, isn't the playmaker he once was, but he'll push second-year WR Dwayne Jarrett for a starting job. Muhammad served as a mentor to Steve Smith during his first stint with the Panthers, and the club is hoping he will have the same impact on Jarrett.

**CHICAGO** OLB Lance Briggs agreed to return for the \$36 million, six-year offer that was on the table well before free agency began. Briggs has proved his value to the Bears' defense, but there didn't seem to be a huge payday out there for him, partly because he doesn't rush the passer.

**DALLAS** By trading NT Jason Ferguson to the Dolphins, the Cowboys showed they're comfortable with Tank Johnson and Jay Ratliff sharing the position next season. Johnson can be a difference-maker as a pass rusher with his explosive first step and ability to collapse the pocket.

**DETROIT** CB Leigh Bodden, acquired in the trade for DT Shaun Rogers, is as quick as he is



Vilma missed most of last season with a knee injury, but the Saints expect him to be full speed by training camp. At 26, Vilma could be the impact player the team needs in the middle.

fast—and he's aggressive and strong in run support. He also does a good job of jamming receivers.

**GREEN BAY** With DT Corey Williams traded to the Browns, Johnny Jolly could win a starting job. He is a solid run stopper with a nasty edge, but he's recovering from a torn rotator cuff. Justin Harrell has more size, longer arms and better pass-rush ability, but he's still growing up.

**MINNESOTA** Former Eagles FB Thomas Tapeh will have a key role as the personal protector for RB Adrian Peterson. Tapeh (6-1, 243) is a physical player but says the most important part of blocking is getting between the defender and the ball-carrier—not delivering a pancake blow.

**NEW YORK** The Giants need third-year LB Gerris Wilkinson to emerge as a weakside

starter. He has impressive size and opened eyes in the regular-season finale, when he played well in place of injured Kawika Mitchell.

**PHILADELPHIA** Free agent Chris Clemons gives coordinator Jim Johnson another 'tweener who can rush the quarterback, as a defensive end or from Johnson's joker position—a standup defensive end in specialized blitz packages.

**ST. LOUIS** The departure of WR Isaac Bruce to San Francisco makes RB Steven Jackson an even bigger part of the offense. Jackson needs a strong offseason of conditioning and weight room work because he is in for a heavy workload in 2008.

**SAN FRANCISCO** Adding free-agent DE Justin Smith gives the 49ers a tough, durable player and helps fill the void left by the retirement of Bryant Young. Smith has the size and versatility to

**CORRESPONDENTS:** Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Darin Gantt; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.



# Q&A

## Asante Samuel Eagles CB

The Eagles ranked 10th in total defense last season but couldn't stay healthy at cornerback and had an NFL-low 19 takeaways—just 11 interceptions. Signing former Patriots cornerback Asante Samuel, 27, to a six-year deal is a big step toward solidifying the secondary. He produced the most interceptions—16—in the NFL over the past two seasons.

**SN:** What do you know about the Eagles' scheme?

**SAMUEL:** It's an aggressive defense, and they like to get after the quarterback. They gave us some trouble on offense last season. They were pressuring and getting after the quarterback and playing an aggressive style of defense. I think I fit right in.

**SN:** How did you become such a playmaker?

**SAMUEL:** Aren't you guys supposed to tell me that? I just play technique, I play sound football, I read my keys, I play with a rhythm, which helps me out, and I like to read the quarterback. That's just my style.



**SN:** Were you concerned that the Eagles already have two cornerbacks signed to long-term contracts?

**SAMUEL:** No, that didn't affect me at all. If they're bringing me in, I figure they're bringing me in to help the team out. I'm not looking forward to anybody leaving or anything like that; I'm just looking forward to playing and having one of the best secondaries in the NFL.

**SN:** Did you consider staying in New England for less money?

**SAMUEL:** I definitely considered that, but I understand that this is a business. Everybody handles their business in their own way. I just had to go with what I felt was best for my family and me. Everybody is happy, and hopefully I made my mama proud.

**SN:** Did you feel underappreciated in New England?

**SAMUEL:** No comment.

**SN:** Have you recovered from the Super Bowl loss?

**SAMUEL:** It's pretty hard. We didn't get it done; the Giants did. It is what it is. Life goes on. I'm an Eagle now, and hopefully we can get to a championship.

**SN:** In your mind, have you earned respect as a cornerback in this league?

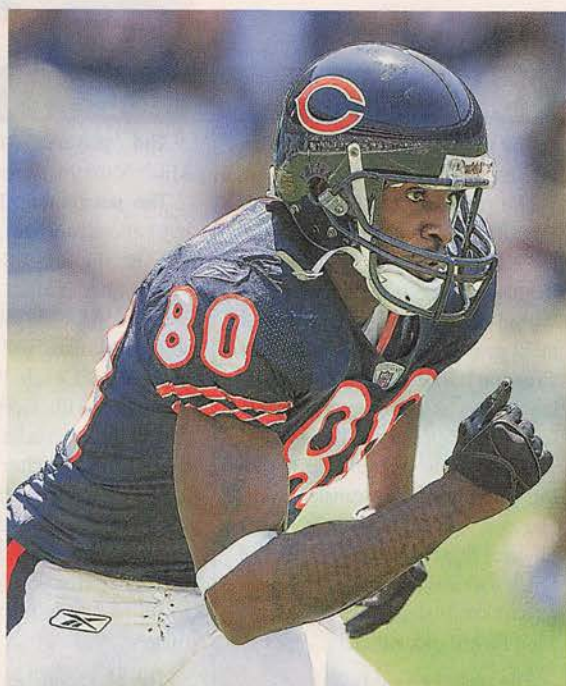
**SAMUEL:** There is no doubt about it. Just going out and working hard every day, being a fourth-rounder, you're not going to be given anything in this league. I just worked my way up and kept working hard, and I'm finally getting the respect that I deserve. —Geoff Mosher

play end in either the 49ers' preferred 3-4 or in a 4-3. Free-agent pickup Isaac Bruce doesn't have the big-play ability he once had, but he's still a polished receiver who knows how to get open.

**SEATTLE** WR Logan Payne spent most of his rookie season on the practice squad, but he'll get his chance to impress the coaches this offseason. Payne is sure-handed, but he needs to develop a better understanding of all of the routes in the offense.

**TAMPA BAY** The additions of C Jeff Faine and TE John Gilmore should improve the team's play up front. Faine is undersized and inconsistent, but he does an excellent job of diagnosing defenses and pulls well. Gilmore is an excellent blocker.

**WASHINGTON** RT Jon Jansen is making steady progress in his recovery from a dislocated ankle and broken fibula. Jansen expects to be ready to go for minicamp, though the team might opt to hold him out as a precautionary measure.



## All about the safeties in Minnesota, eh?

WR **Bernard Berrian** doesn't have a sprinter's speed, but he knows how to create space down the sideline. Assuming Berrian can beat single coverage on deep patterns, he will force Vikings' opponents to move their safeties back to normal depth, which will give RB Adrian Peterson more room to run. If the safeties stay in the box, the team hopes Berrian can take advantage by making big plays over the top.

On the other side of the ball, new SS Madiou Williams should be an upgrade over Dwight Smith defending the pass. Defensive coordinator Leslie Frazier plans to use him to defend the slot receiver in the nickel. Williams is familiar with Frazier's scheme from the days when both were with Cincinnati.



Some of the big-timers—including Michigan, LSU and USC—will have new starters under center this fall.

# Do you know who your QB is?

By Matt Hayes

[mhayes@sportingnews.com](mailto:mhayes@sportingnews.com)

Let me reintroduce a guy named Brad Lewis. Once a career backup at West Virginia, he was a good teammate and a hard worker. An overachiever. Lewis was West Virginia's first quarterback under Rich Rodriguez in 2001, the first in Morgantown to control the now wildly popular spread option offense.

Why do we care about Brad Lewis, you ask? Because he's Steven Threet, that's why. And Justin Feagin, Rodriguez's first quarterback recruit at Michigan, is Rasheed Marshall.

Stay with me, folks.

Lewis didn't fit Rodriguez's spread option offense in 2001, just like Threet—the leader of Michigan's quarterback competition this spring by default—doesn't now. Threet is a classic pocket quarterback who has no business running the multiple scheme, but he's all Michigan has. For now, anyway.

In 2001, Lewis held things together while Marshall (then a freshman) learned the system—and while Rodriguez learned to trust Marshall to take care of the ball and to manage a game. Marshall was the team's best quarterback by the end of 2001 and later had three productive seasons as the starter before some guy named Pat White arrived in the middle of the 2005 season to redefine the position.

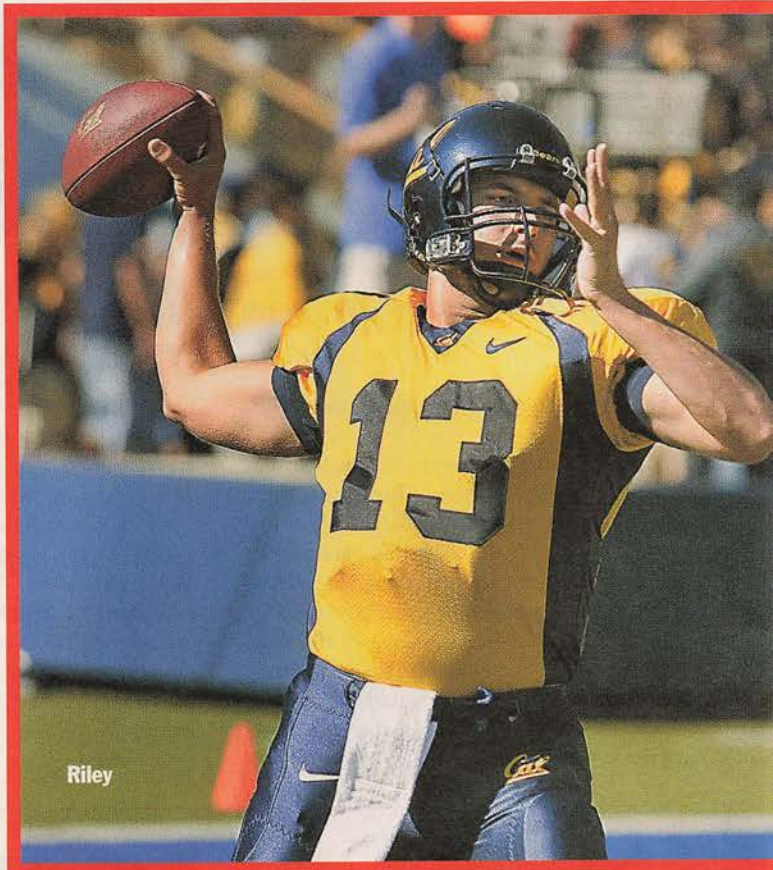
No matter how Michigan's quarterback competition plays out this spring, the real question is how quickly Feagin picks up the offense in the fall and Threet hands over the keys. One more thing: West Virginia won three games in 2001. It's a process—so don't expect miracles in Year 1.

Five other key quarterback competitions this spring:

## speedreads

Nick Saban called a news conference to announce that off-field problems at Alabama have to end. That's great. Maybe the rest of the SEC—with the exception of Vanderbilt, of course—can do the same and we'll call it a day.

I still can't comprehend the urgency to change the pace of the game with new clock rules. College football has gone from a regional to national sport and generated millions from television contracts. Its popularity has surpassed every sport this side of the NFL. Yet knuckleheads on the NCAA rules committee think it needs to be tweaked.



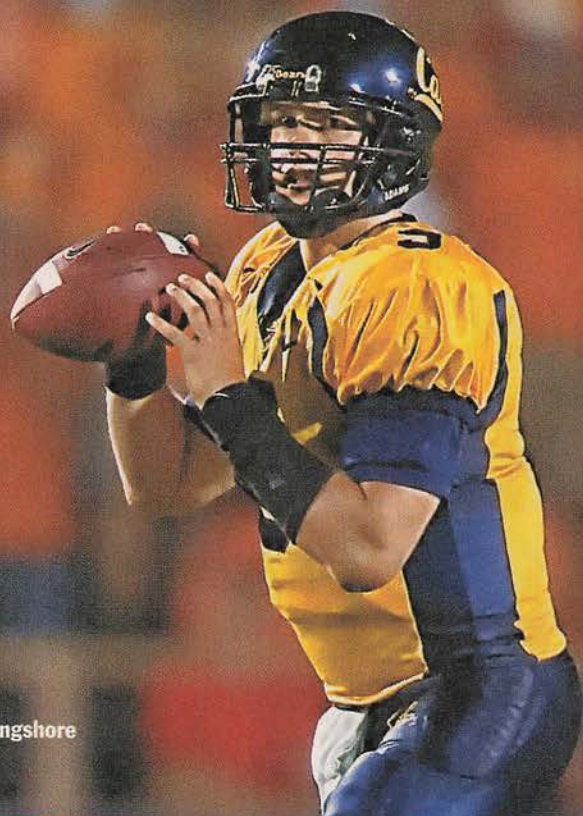
Riley

LSU	USC	Notre Dame
<p><b>The players:</b> Jarrett Lee, Andrew Hatch.</p> <p><b>The positioning:</b> Even though Ryan Perrilloux is suspended, the job is his if he stays out of trouble the rest of the offseason. Perrilloux started twice last season and played in 12 games, but coordinator Gary Crowton has been mentally preparing Lee, a strong-armed redshirt freshman, since last fall. Crowton also likes Hatch, a walk-on Crowton convinced to transfer from Harvard. Hatch doesn't have the physical skills of Lee, but neither of LSU's national championship quarterbacks this decade (Matt Mauk, Matt Flynn) did, either.</p> <p><b>The pick:</b> Perrilloux.</p>	<p><b>The players:</b> Mark Sanchez, Mitch Mustain, Aaron Corp.</p> <p><b>The positioning:</b> Despite all the hype about Sanchez and Mustain—two of the most heralded high school quarterbacks this decade—competing for the job, Corp, a redshirt freshman, will make things interesting. Coach Pete Carroll is infatuated with Corp's athleticism and ability to make plays outside the pocket. Sanchez started three games last fall when John David Booty was injured, and Mustain, a transfer from Arkansas, was the best quarterback on the field in some of USC's full squad scrimmages.</p> <p><b>The pick:</b> Sanchez.</p>	<p><b>The players:</b> Jimmy Clausen, Evan Sharpley, Dayne Crist.</p> <p><b>The positioning:</b> The Irish must address significant protection issues—an unholy 58 sacks surrendered last season—before the quarterback competition shakes out. Coach Charlie Weis says Crist, an incoming freshman, will get a serious look, but don't think this isn't Clausen's job. He's a terrific talent who was beaten down last fall by horrible blocking and the pressure of a failed season. The biggest improvement for quarterbacks is made between freshman and sophomore seasons. Watch how quickly Clausen develops this fall.</p> <p><b>The pick:</b> Clausen.</p>



**ONLINE EXCLUSIVE**

Want more spring position battles? Check out Tom Dienhart's analysis of the key issues for every school in the BCS conferences at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).



Longshore

## Miami

**The players:** Robert Marve, Jacory Harris, Cannon Smith.

**The positioning:** The culprit for Miami's fall from the elite? The quarterback spot. In the past five years, UM quarterbacks have thrown 87 touchdown passes against a staggering 73 interceptions. Marve would have competed for the job last year as a freshman, but a car accident forced him to redshirt. Harris, a freshman recruit who enrolled early, is intriguing because his athleticism will allow the Canes to use more spread option sets.

**The pick:** Marve.

## California

**The players:** Nate Longshore, Kevin Riley.

**The positioning:** This is one to watch. Longshore is a two-year starter, but he struggled in the second half of last season—both physically and mentally—because of shaky protection and a high ankle sprain. Riley is coach Jeff Tedford's most talented quarterback in his six years in Berkeley—he rallied Cal to a victory over Air Force in the Armed Forces Bowl—but he's raw and tries to force throws with his strong arm. Tedford wants a thinker, not a thrower.

**The pick:** Longshore.

Illinois has high expectations for dynamic QB **Juice Williams**, who struggled as a thrower last season and was exposed in the Rose Bowl loss to USC. Before arriving at Illinois, Williams wasn't coached properly and knew little about mechanics and reading

progressions. In two years under coordinator **Mike Locksley**, Williams has made significant strides but needs more help on the outside. Compounding that issue: Blossoming star WR **Arrelious Benn** will be limited—and likely held out of contact—this spring while recovering from a shoulder injury that was problematic all last season. Williams needs more work with Benn for the two to develop consistency and chemistry. > Sophomore RB **Vondrell McGee** will get the first shot at replacing **Jamaal Charles** at Texas, but the staff is excited about incoming freshman **Tre' Newton**. Even though Texas lost out on heralded recruit **Darrell Scott**, many on the staff think Newton, who enrolled early and is taking part in spring drills, could have climbed to the top of the depth chart even if Scott had been in the fold. > **Kirby Smart's** promotion to defensive coordinator at Alabama is a move by coach **Nick Saban** to develop Smart much as he did **Will Muschamp**, who is now at Texas. Smart and Muschamp, one of the game's best coordinators, played at Georgia in the 1990s and are still close and share ideas. Saban, who promoted Muschamp to defensive coordinator at LSU earlier this decade, sees the same potential in Smart. > Despite how bad things look for **Reggie Bush** with each unraveling episode of a civil lawsuit filed against him, the only possible revelation that could affect USC's 2004 national title is if Bush says the coaches or administration knew about alleged dealings with sports marketers who claimed to have represented him. As long as that doesn't happen, the national title is safe, one BCS source says. If it's proved that Bush accepted money while at USC, the NCAA will force the school to forfeit wins in games he played while ineligible.

## > INSIDE DISH



McGee

JAY CROWNS / SN (3)





## EXPOSURE

### Your new keystone combo

Red Sox second baseman Dustin Pedroia makes the, uh, pivot on the dance floor, with partner Iryna Kolina during the "Dancing With the All-Stars" benefit for the Mike Lowell Foundation. Lowell's foundation raises money to help pay the costs of cancer treatment for children in Miami

and Boston. Professional dancers schooled four Red Sox players for two hours in merengue and salsa dance steps. Pedroia tore off his shirt and threw it at Red Sox owner John Henry in an impromptu demonstration of wild enthusiasm. No injuries were reported.

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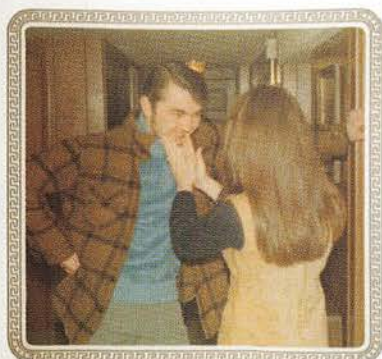




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